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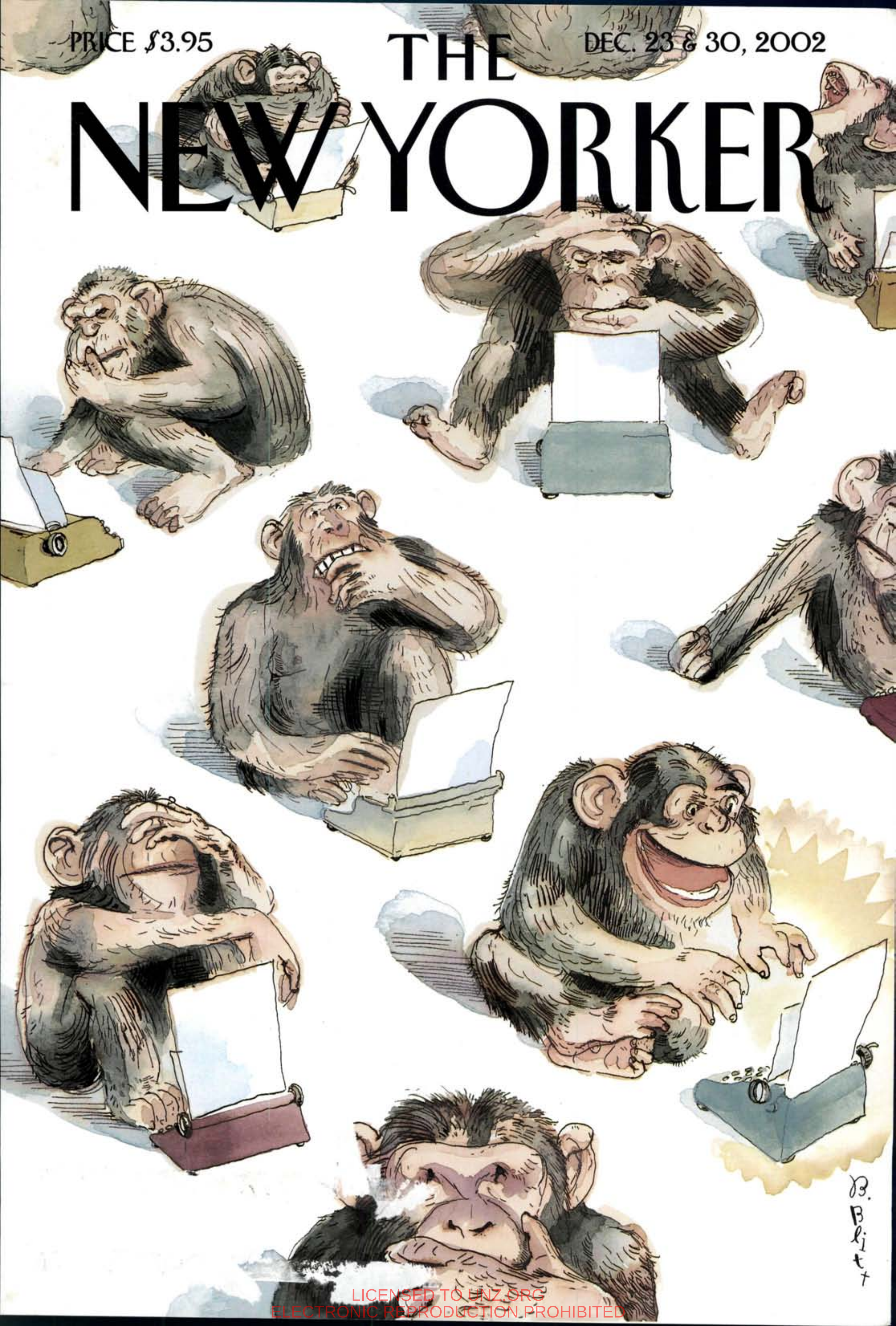

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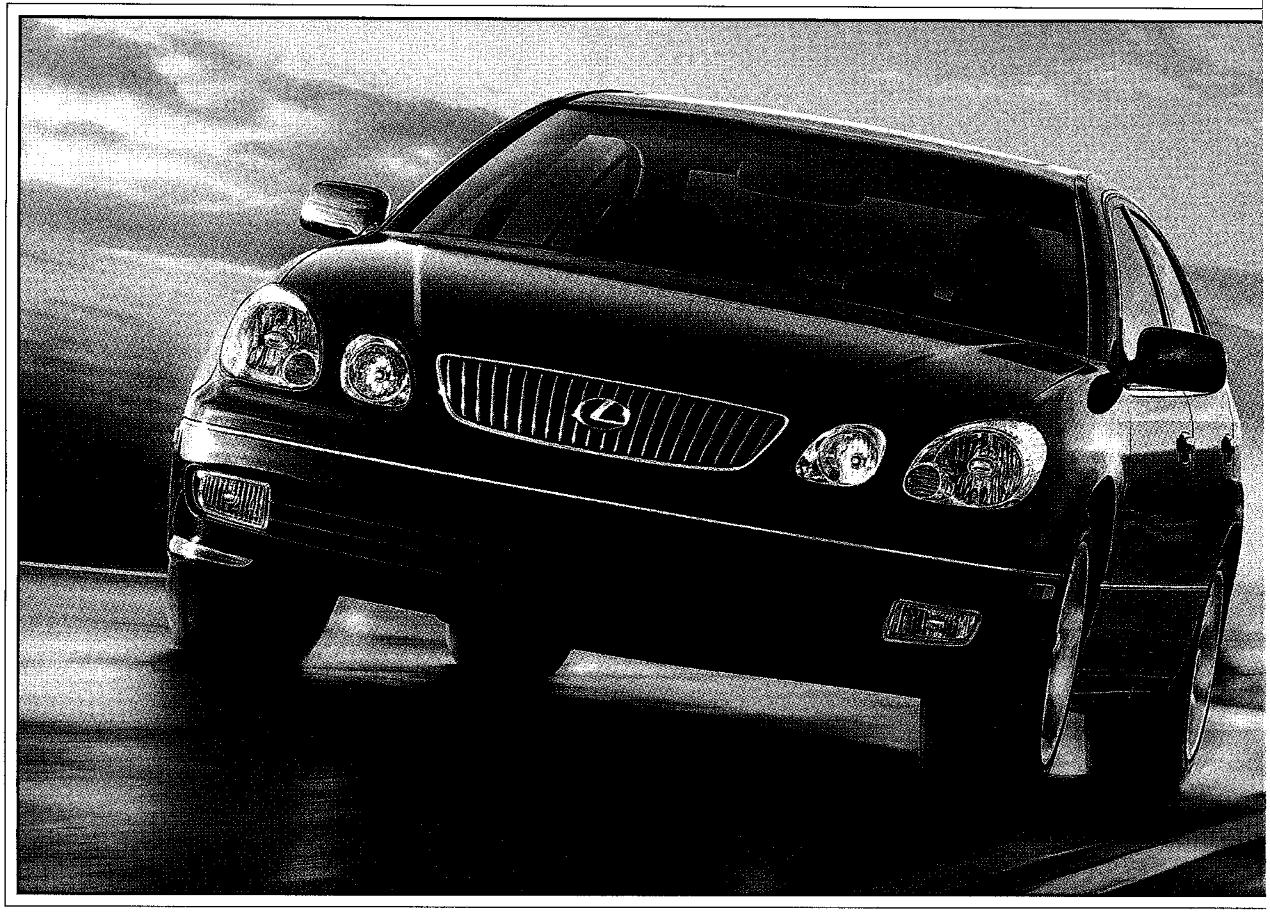

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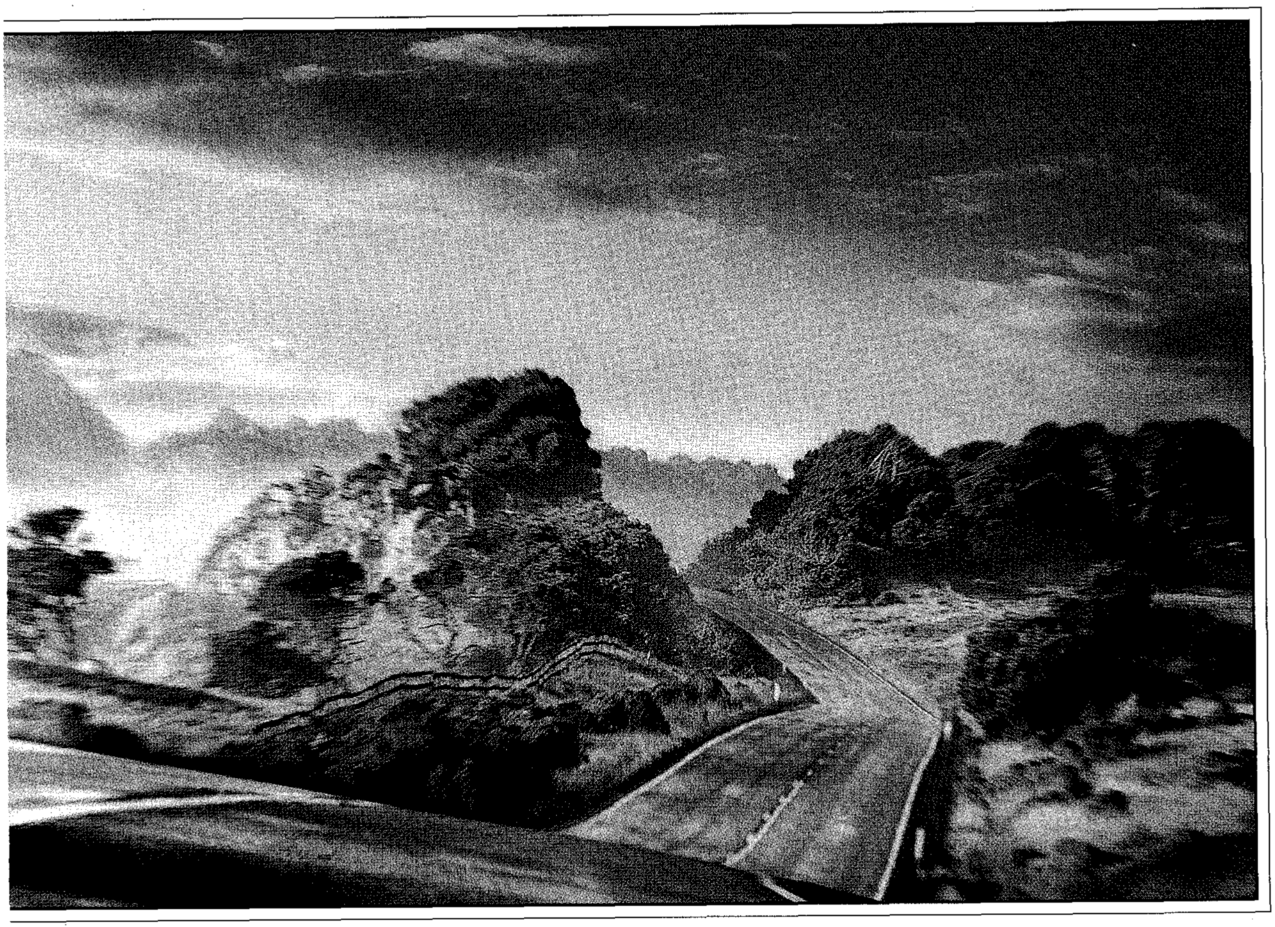

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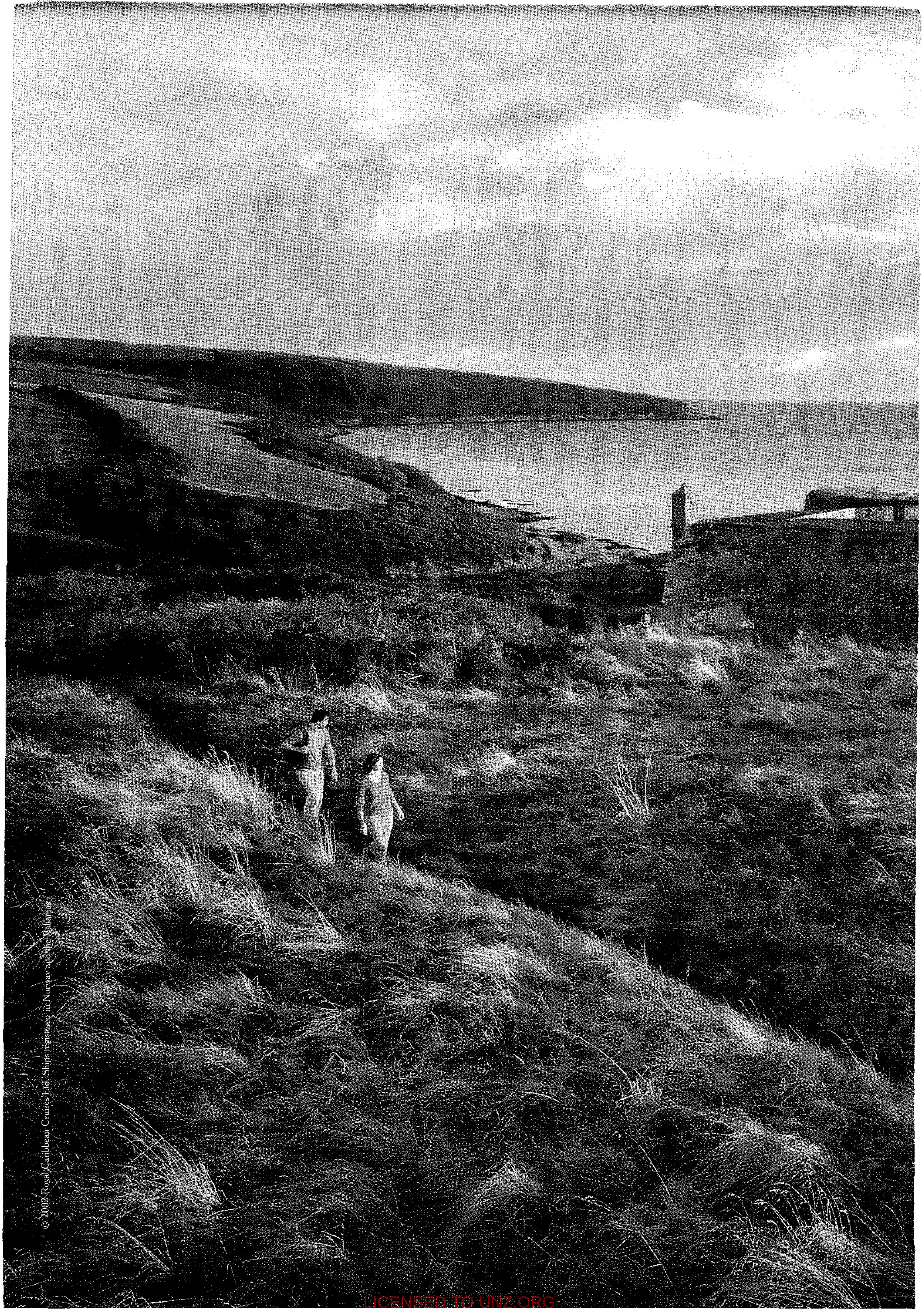

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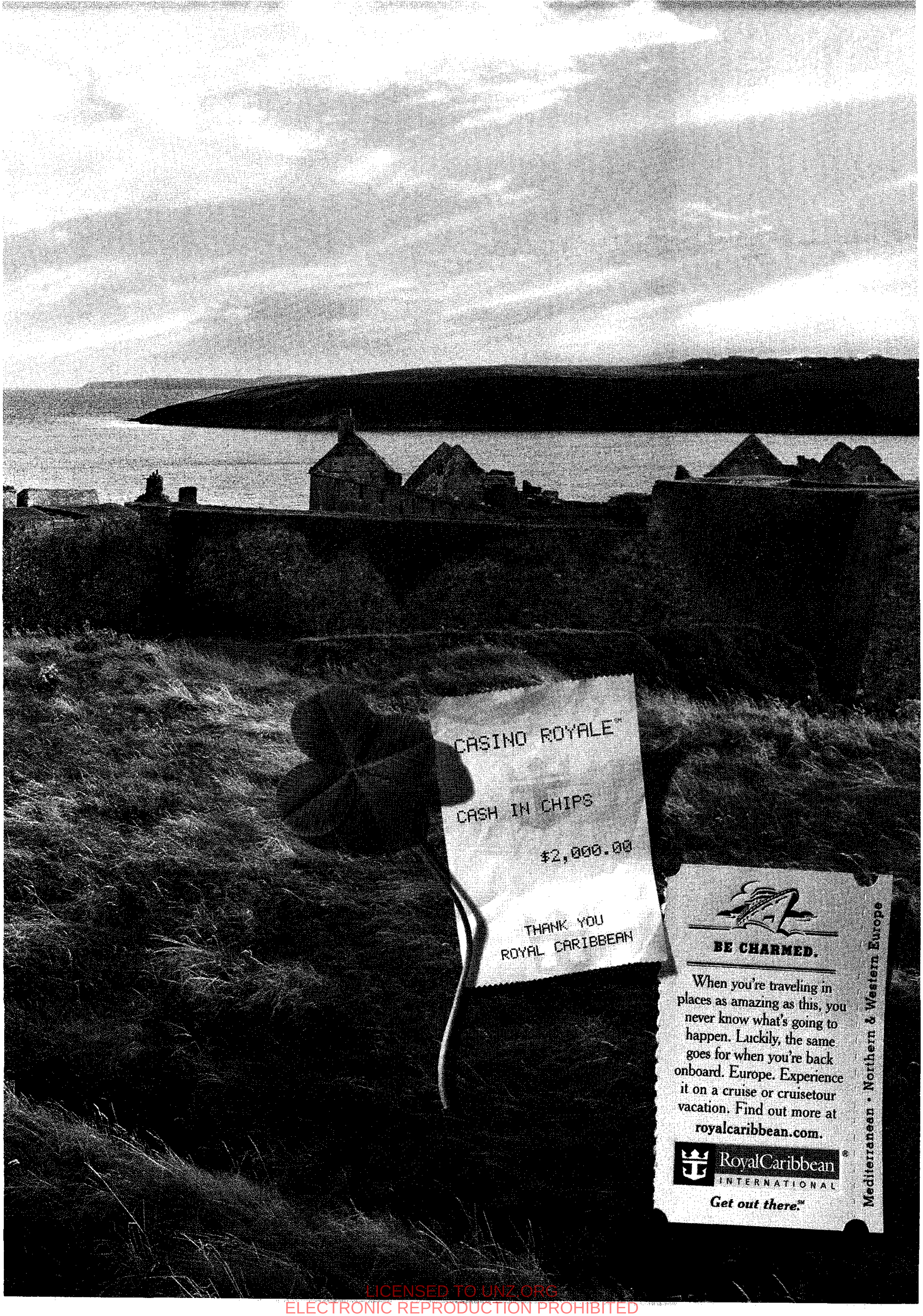
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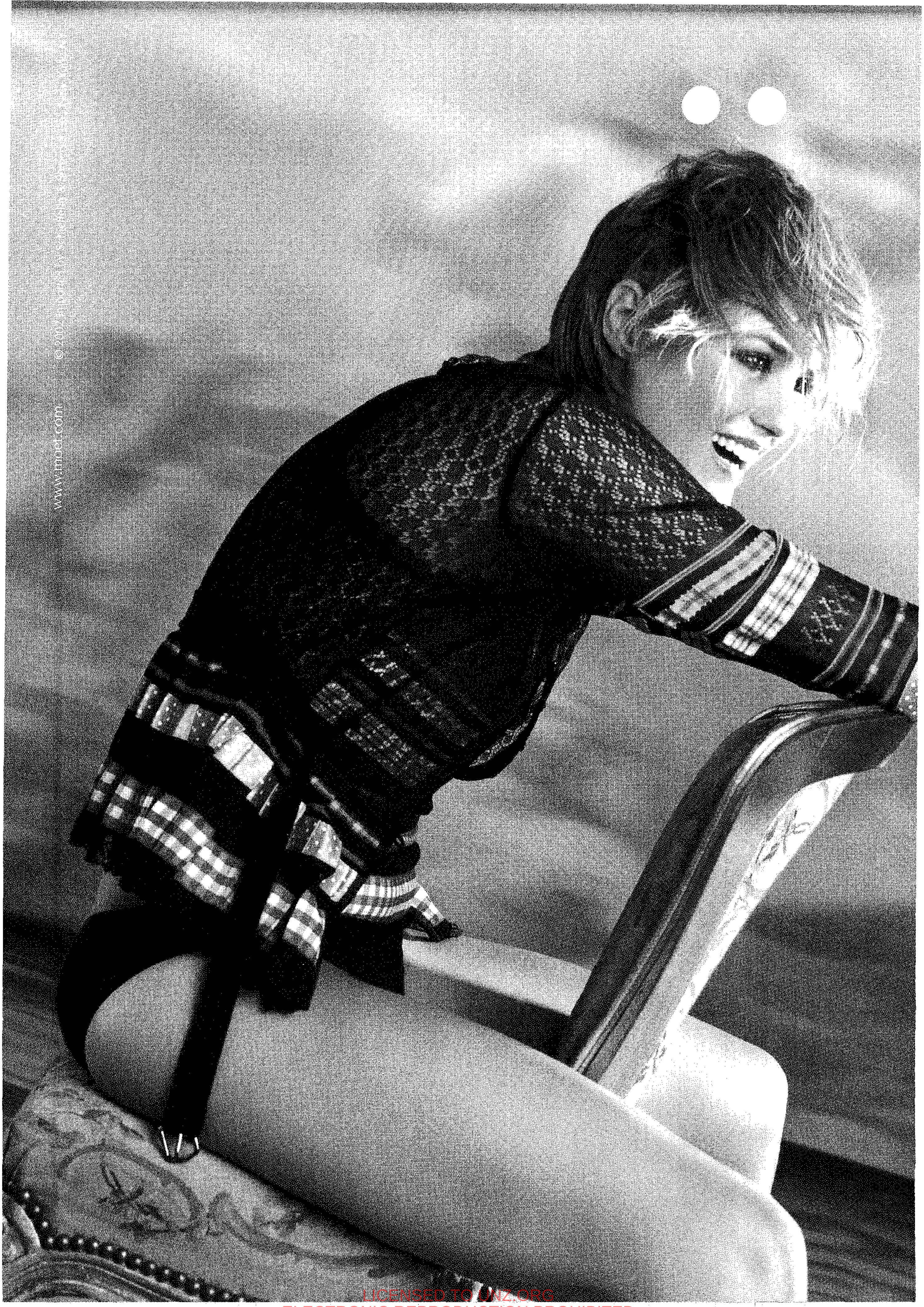
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THE WINTER FICTION ISSUE

DECEMBER 23 & 30, 2002

18 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

57 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
The problem with being nice; rapping for Allah.

Seymour M. Hersh 66 ANNALS OF NATIONAL SECURITY
Manhunt
A new approach to the war against Al Qaeda.

Norman Mailer 76 LIFE AND LETTERS
Birds and Lions
Scenes from a writer's life.

Burkhard Bilger 86 OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS
Waiting for Ghosts
The many careers of a paranormal investigator.

Mary Ellen Mark, Joan Acocella 114 BEHIND THE SCENES
The children of "The Nutcracker."

FICTION

E. L. Doctorow 102 "Jolene: A Life"
Zadie Smith 116 "The Trials of Finch"
Annie Proulx 124 "The Trickle-Down Effect"
Alessandro Baricco 128 "Without Blood"

THE CRITICS

Louis Menand 148 A CRITIC AT LARGE
Rethinking Dr. Seuss.

155 BOOKS
Briefly Noted

Peter Schjeldahl 156 THE ART WORLD
The art of David Hammons.

Paul Goldberger 159 THE SKY LINE
Tadao Ando builds in Texas.

John Lahr 162 THE THEATRE
"Medea," "Imaginary Friends," "Adult Entertainment."
Photograph by Richard Avedon.

David Denby 166 THE CURRENT CINEMA
"Gangs of New York," "Catch Me If You Can,"
"The Hours."

POEMS

Elizabeth Bishop 105 "After the Rain"
Carol Muske-Dukes 126 "A Private Matter"
Elizabeth Bishop 142 "Breakfast Song"
Adam Zagajewski 161 "Poetry Searches for Radiance"

COVER *"Evolving Story," by Barry Blitt* THE BACK PAGE *"2002: The Quiz," by Paul Slansky* DRAWINGS *Frank Cotham, Barbara Smaller, Harry Bliss, Robert Mankoff, P. C. Vey, Alex Gregory, Mick Stevens, Roz Chast, Leo Cullum, David Sipress, William Hamilton, Edward Koren, Gahan Wilson, William Haefeli, Mike Twohy, Charles Barsotti, Tom Hachtman, Bruce Eric Kaplan*

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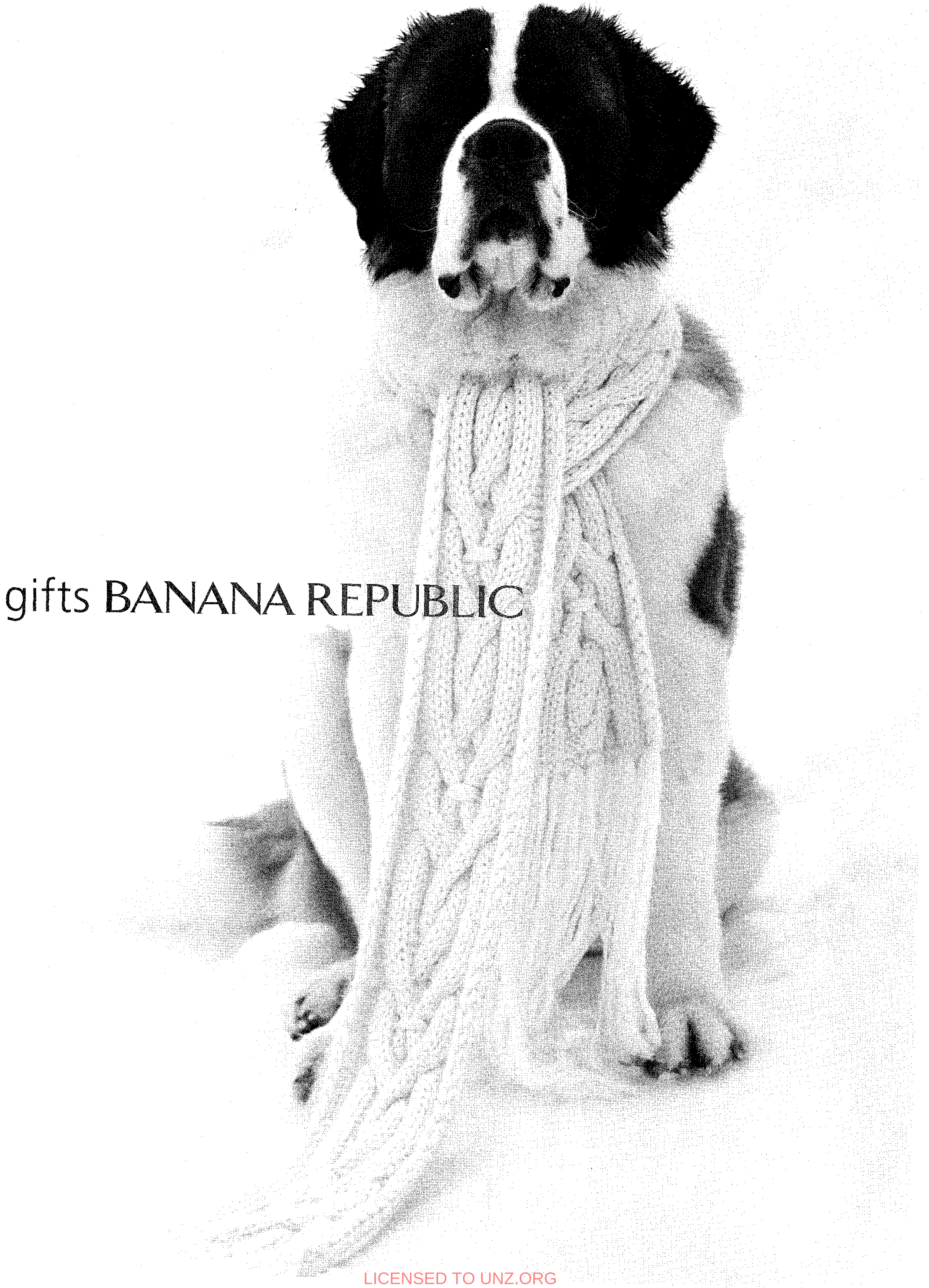
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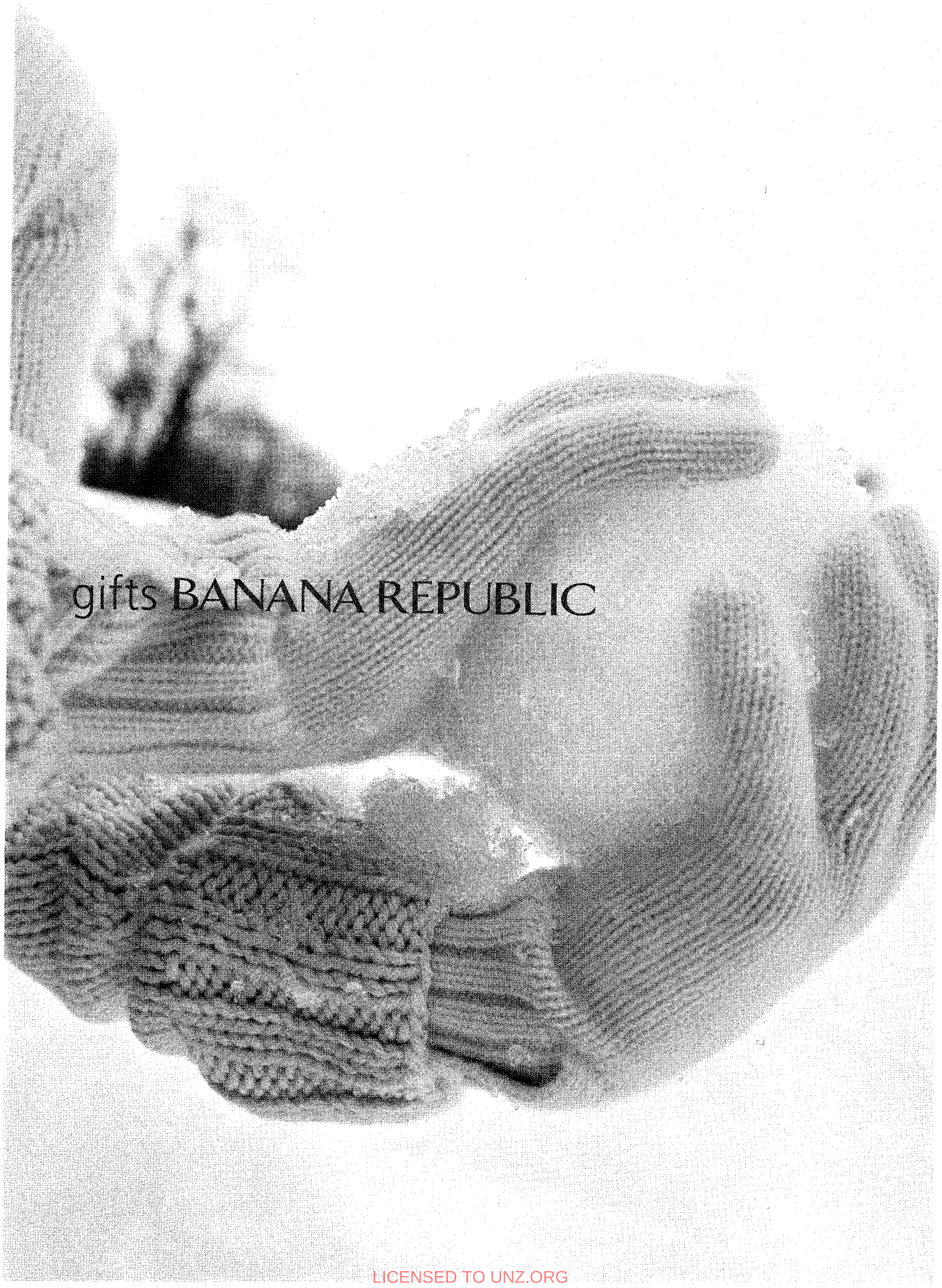
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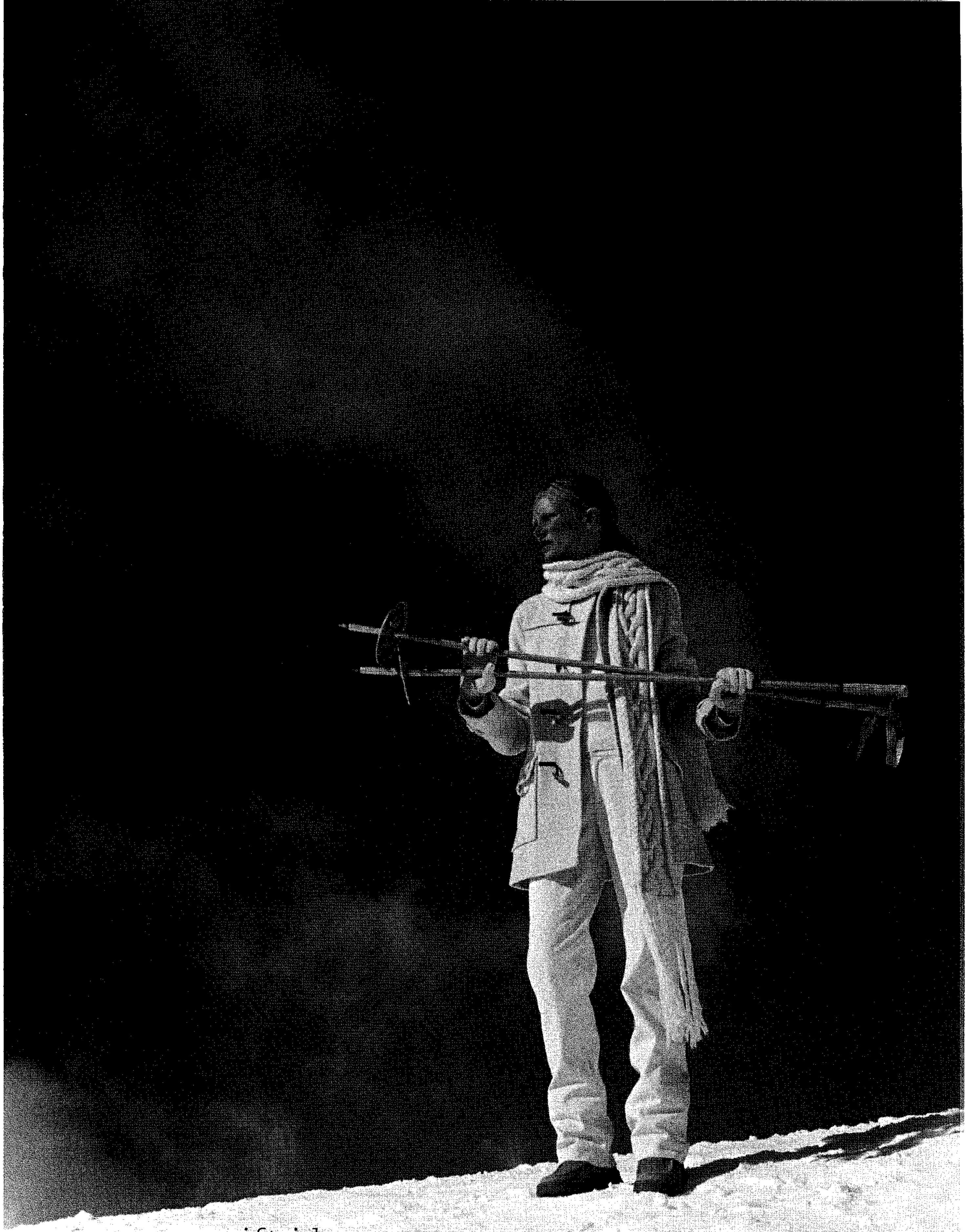

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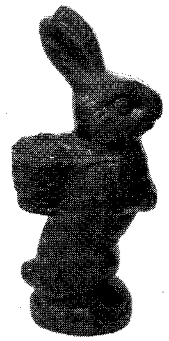

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CONTRIBUTORS

E. L. Doctorow (Fiction, p. 102) has published ten novels, including "Billy Bathgate," "The Waterworks," and "City of God."

Seymour M. Hersh ("Manhunt," p. 66), a contributor since 1971, is working on a book about the Bush Administration's war on terrorism.

Zadie Smith (Fiction, p. 116) is the author of the novels "White Teeth" and "The Autograph Man."

Norman Mailer ("Birds and Lions," p. 76) has written more than thirty books, including "The Time of Our Time" and "The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing," which will be published on January 31st, his eightieth birthday.

Carol Muske-Dukes (Poem, p. 126) has a new book of poems, "Sparrow," coming out in the spring.

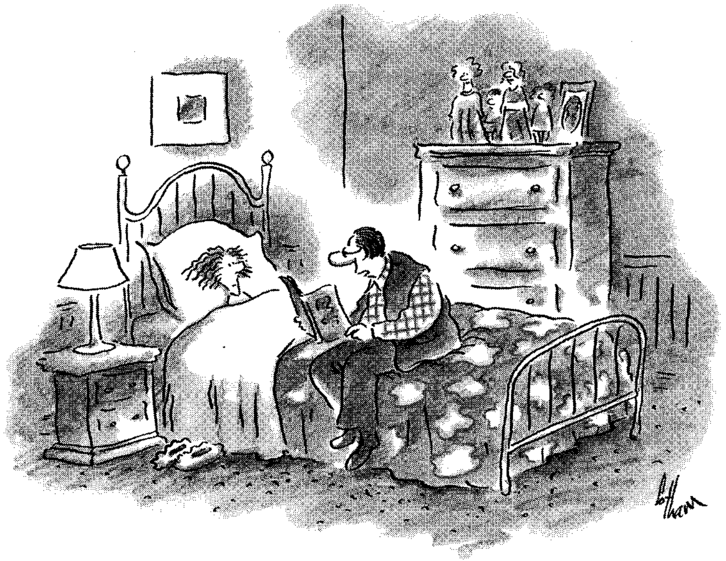
Alessandro Baricco (Fiction, p. 128) is the author of five novels, including "Silk" and, most recently, "City"; two books of essays; and two plays.

Annie Proulx (Fiction, p. 124) has a new novel, "That Old Ace in the Hole," out this month.

Elizabeth Bishop (Poems, p. 105; p. 142) published her poetry in the magazine from 1940 until her death, in 1979. Her uncollected poems are in the archives at the Vassar College Libraries.

Louis Menand (A Critic at Large, p. 148) won this year's Pulitzer Prize for History for his book "The Metaphysical Club." His latest work is "American Studies."

Burkhard Bilger ("Waiting for Ghosts," p. 86) is a staff writer and the author of "Noodling for Flatheads." ♦



"And then we are led to believe that they lived happily ever after."

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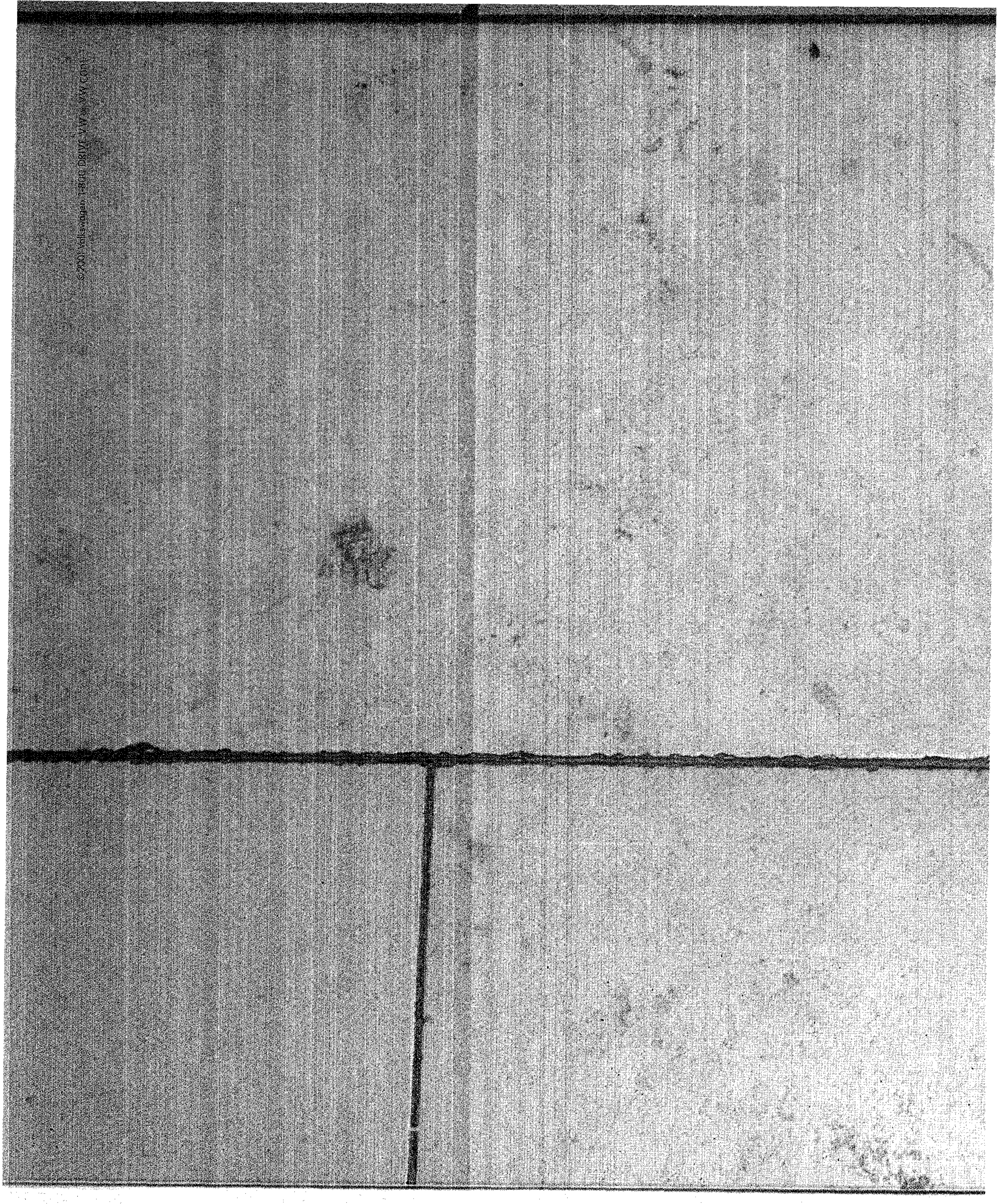
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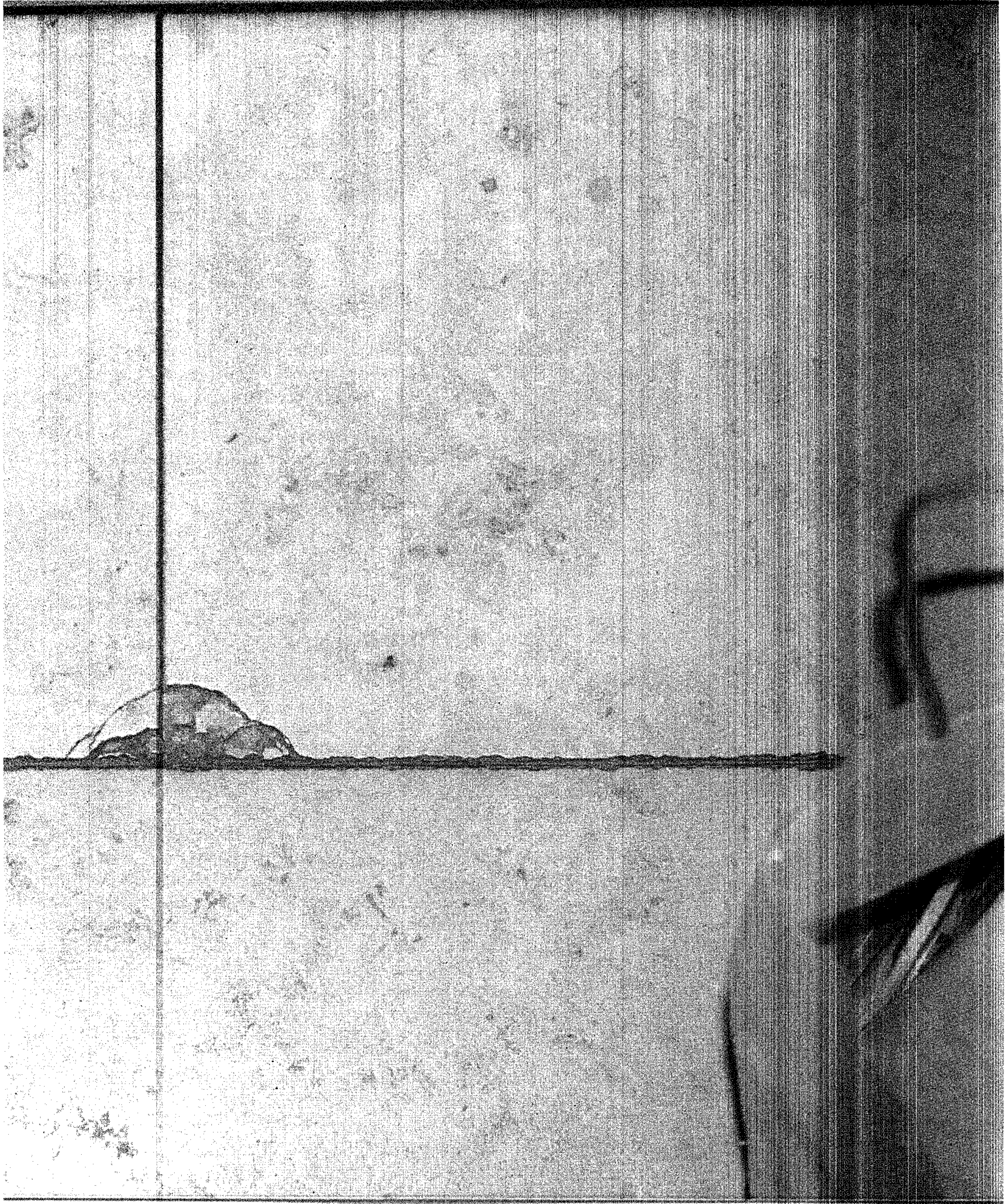

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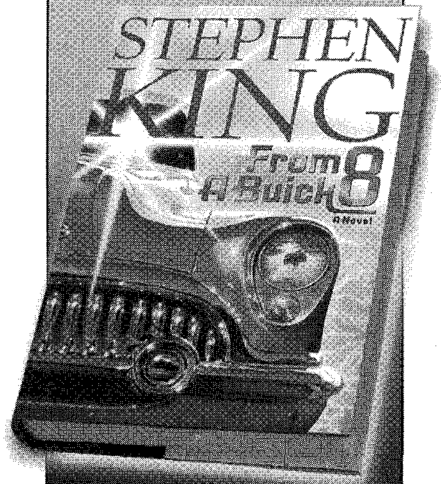

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A GOOD MOTHER

Joe Klein's piece on me was a thoughtful look at various parts of my life ("The Long War of John Kerry," December 2nd). I did, however, want to correct an erroneous impression left not by Klein but by a brief observation by former Senator Tim Wirth regarding my former wife, Julia Thorne. Senator Wirth, who is a friend of mine, said that it was his "sense" that I returned to Massachusetts frequently to be with my children because Julia "wasn't always reliable during those years." With all due respect, he could not have been more wrong. I did rush back to Boston often to be with my kids—but never because my wife wasn't there for them. She was a wonderful mother, always totally committed and dedicated to our children. If anything, she made up for my deficits. I could never have pursued my career in public service without her support and understanding.

It would also be wrong to infer that Julia's depression was the reason our marriage ended. Anyone who has experienced the dissolution of a marriage understands the stresses and sadness it involves. Neither of us knew much about depression when Julia first became aware that she suffered from it, but her brief experience with it was not the cause of our breakup. We grew in different directions and came to understand that we wanted different things out of life. Julia now leads a complete, happy life with her new husband and new career. We remain connected as good friends who shared an important part of our lives and who, to this day, share responsibility and love for the two remarkable daughters we have been blessed with. Both of us are proud that, while our marriage failed, our parenting did not.

Senator John Kerry
Washington, D.C.

PAYING FOR SEPTEMBER 11TH

Kenneth Feinberg's appointment as special master of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund was based in large part, as Elizabeth Kolbert points out, on his experience adjudicating class-action claims ("The Calculator," November 25th). But precisely this history should have disqualified him. Feinberg is used to adversarial cases where a claimant asserts that his injury was caused by the defendant, from whom he wants payment, and the defendant denies responsibility. In this case, there is no issue of liability, but only of compensation for a tragic loss, which Congress has decided should be paid by the United States. Standard rules of valuation have no place here; what is needed is compassion, and Feinberg does not seem distinguished in this respect. He would be ideal if the victims were suing Osama bin Laden, not asking for what Congress has held to be their due.

A. Carleton Dukess
Larchmont, N.Y.

One of the most troubling questions Kolbert's article raises is why taxpayer money (and lots of it) is being given to victims' families on the basis of economic loss rather than need. The fund relies on our complacent acceptance of the idea that a four-hundred-thousand-dollar-a-year stock broker is worth a lot more than a janitor who supported a wife and two children. We do not consider the ability of the surviving spouse to work, or question the assumption that the broker or the janitor would have continued to earn the same salary, or wonder whether huge payouts somehow demean the uncompensated deaths of victims of other acts of terror—or of floods, or of drive-by shootings. Feinberg might do better to apply his talents to fixing the absurdities of the legislation, instead of simply implementing it with apologies.

Randall Kay
San Francisco, Calif.

•

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All the best to you this season

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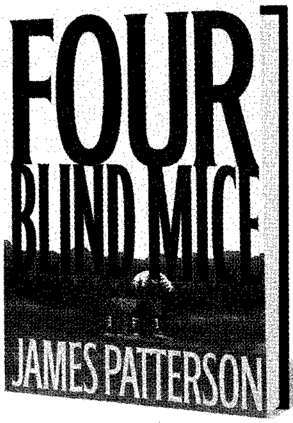
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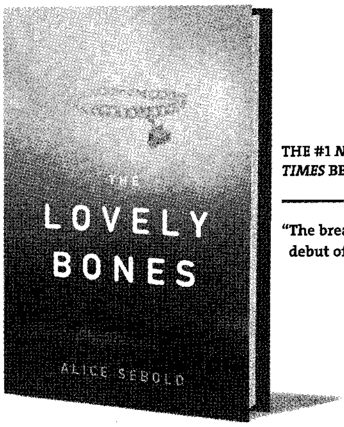
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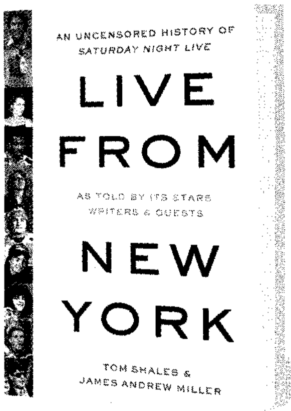
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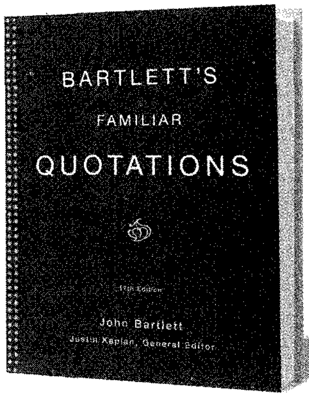
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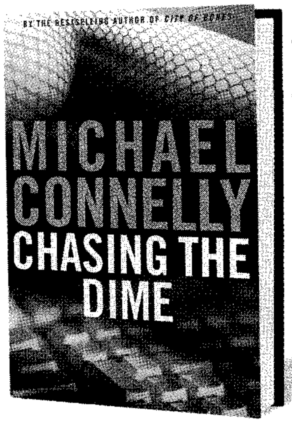
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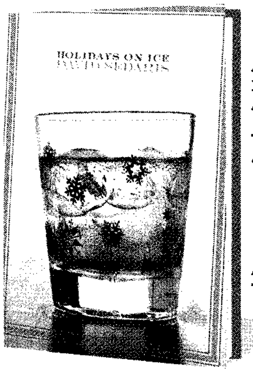
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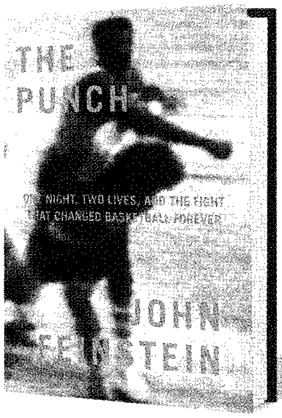
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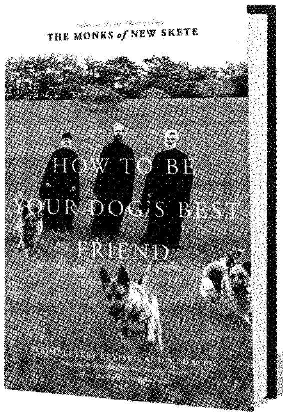
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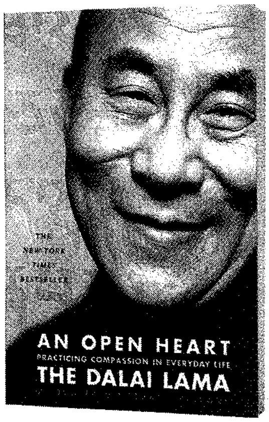
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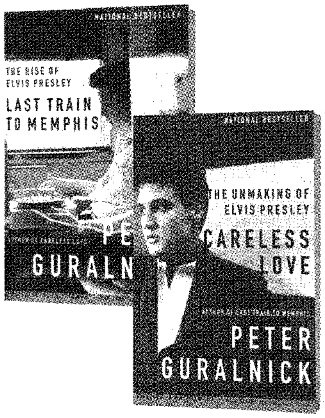
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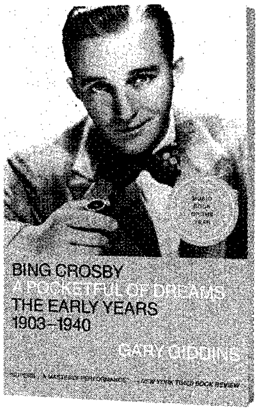
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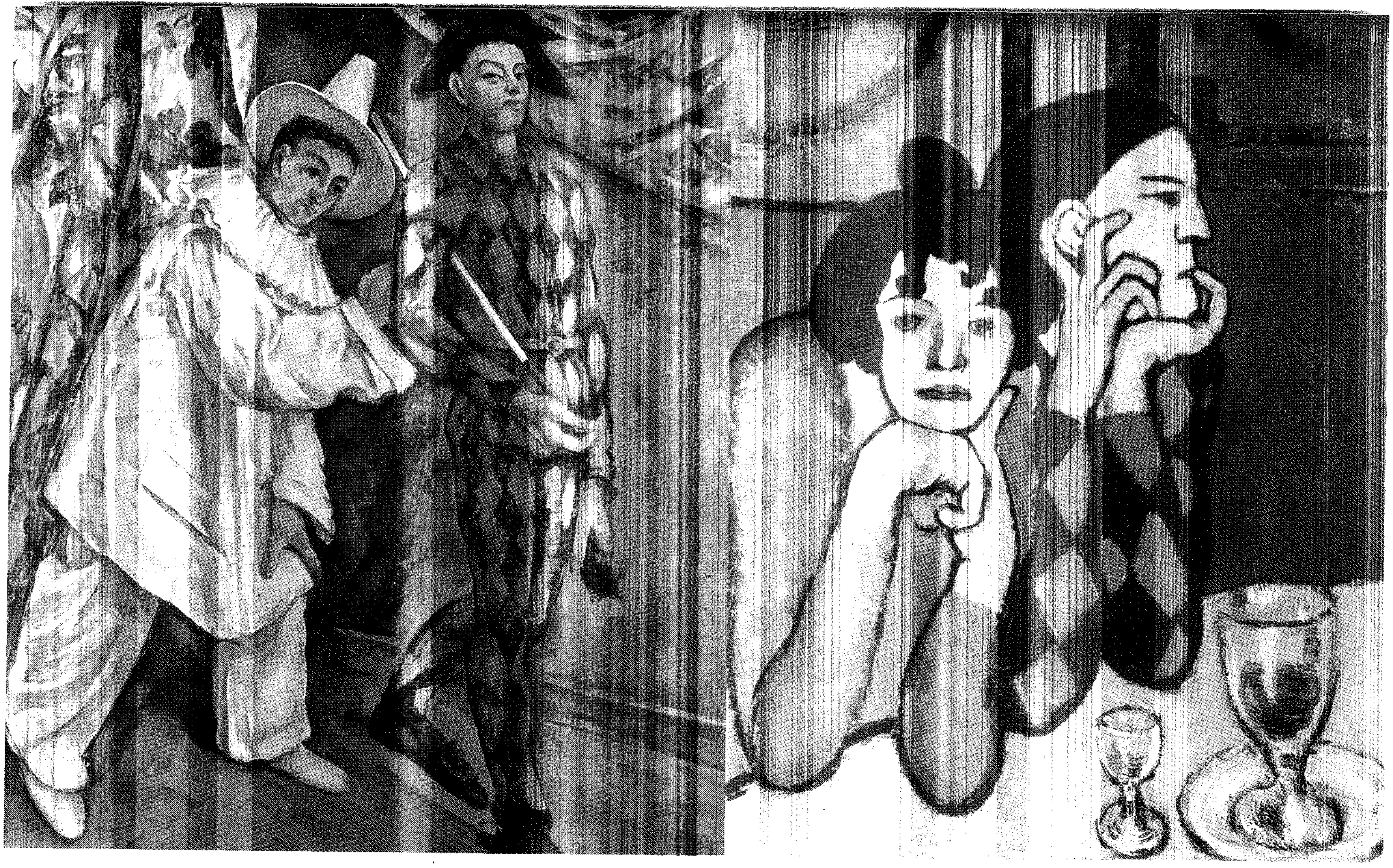

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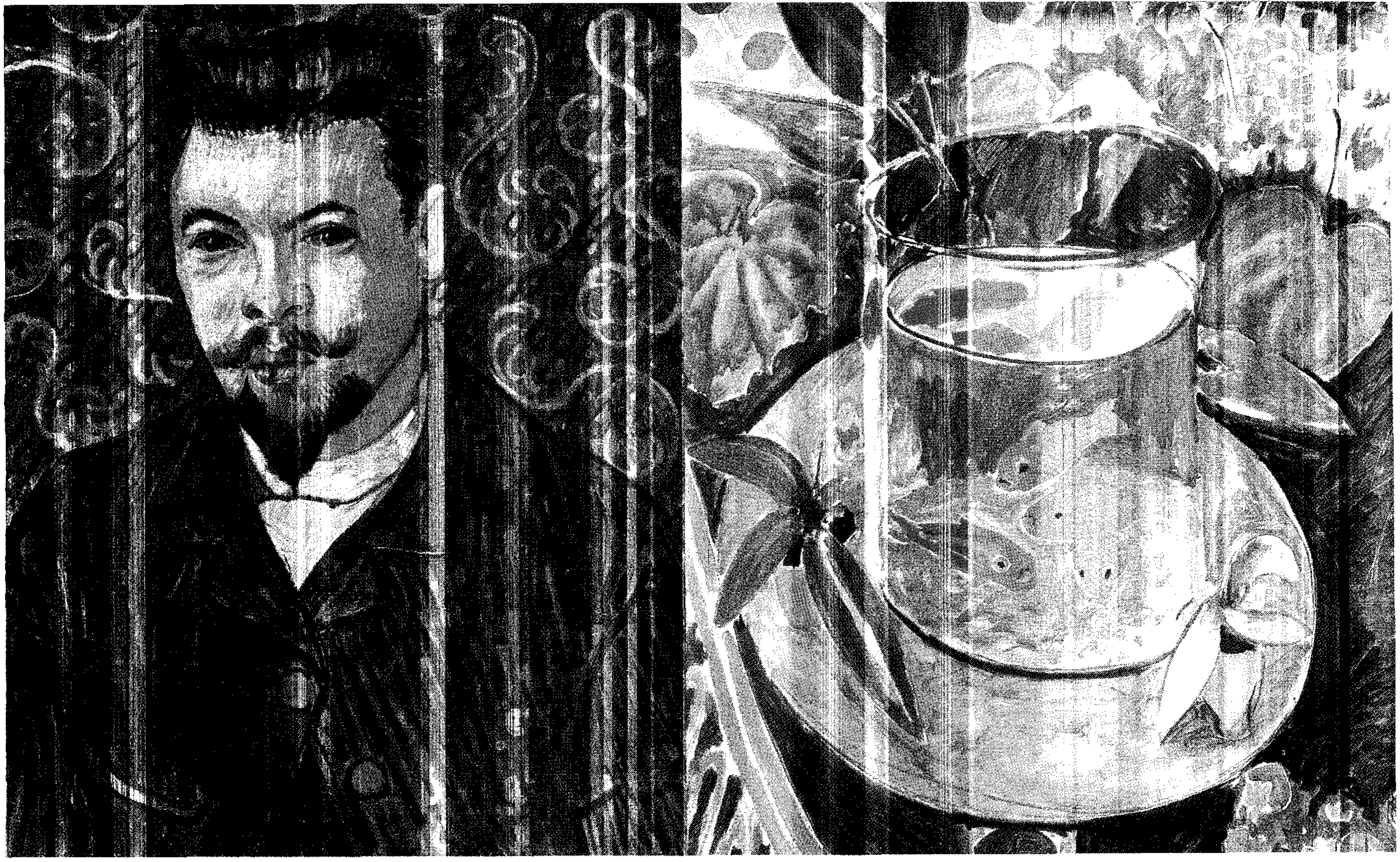

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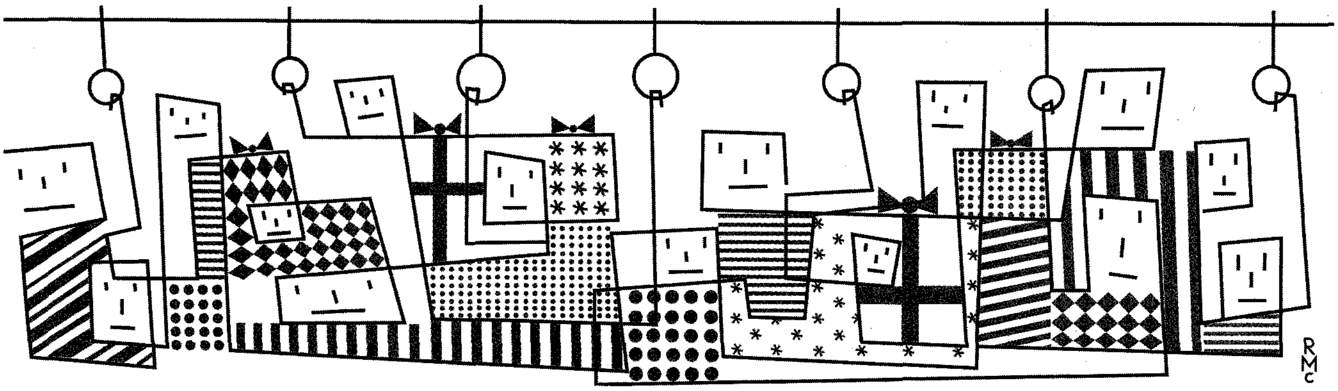


THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

DINNER AT EIGHT
Gerald Gutierrez directs a new production of George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber's 1932 play about a grand New York dinner party. Marian Seldes stars. Two previews on Dec. 18. Opens Dec. 19 at 6:45. (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 239-6200.)

HANK WILLIAMS: LOST HIGHWAY
Jason Petty plays the legendary country-and-Western singer in a musical biography directed by Randal Myler. In previews. Opens Dec. 19 at 8. (Manhattan Ensemble Theatre, 55 Mercer St. 239-6200.)

PORTERPHILES
The York Theatre Company presents a staged production of thirty unpublished Cole Porter songs, which were recently discovered by the Porter expert Judy Brown, and bear the seal of approval of the Porter Trust. Directed by James Morgan, choreographed by Barry McNabb, and sung by Lynne Halliday, Ricky Russell, and Stephen Zinnato. In previews. Opens Dec. 19 at 8. (St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. 239-6200.)

TARTUFFE
Joe Dowling directs the Richard Wilbur translation of Molière's play, with Brian Bedford, Henry Goodman, and J. Smith-Cameron. In previews. (Roundabout, 227 W. 42nd St. 719-1300.)

TOMMY TUNE: WHITE TIE AND TAILS
Joined by the Manhattan Rhythm Kings and a sixteen-member big band, the entertainer baptizes the Little Shubert Theatre with an evening of song-and-dance numbers set to the music of Irving Berlin, Gershwin, Cole Porter, the Beatles, and Fred Astaire. Opens Dec. 18 at 6:45. (422 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

THE TRAVELS OF BABAR
Raphael Mostel's gentle, lyrical show for children uses an eight-piece orchestra and a color slide show of original Babar art work to retell Jean de Brunhoff's tales of a family of decorous elephants and their animal and human friends. Performances are in English, French, and Spanish. Dec. 27-31. (Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. 355-6160.)

OPENED RECENTLY

ADULT ENTERTAINMENT
A new comedy by Elaine May, starring Danny Aiello and Jeannie Berlin, about porn actors who decide to make their own movie. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Variety Arts, 110 Third Ave. 239-6200.)

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

BETTY RULES
A kinetic alterna-rock musical, directed by Michael Greif ("Rent"), chronicling the nearly two-decade-long career of a real-life girl band called Betty and its members' battle to keep the group and their sanity intact on the road, at home, onstage, and even in therapy. (Zipper, 336 W. 37th St. 239-6200.)

BEWILDERNESS
Who could dislike a man who hates dolphins? In his ninety-minute routine, the genial, sleepy-eyed English comedian Bill Bailey gives this and forty-odd other reasons to relish his sardonic take on life. Like his countryman Eddie Izzard, Bailey deploys a mild, chatty brand of humor that creeps up on the audience, convulsing them by afterthought. (47th Street Theatre, 304 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

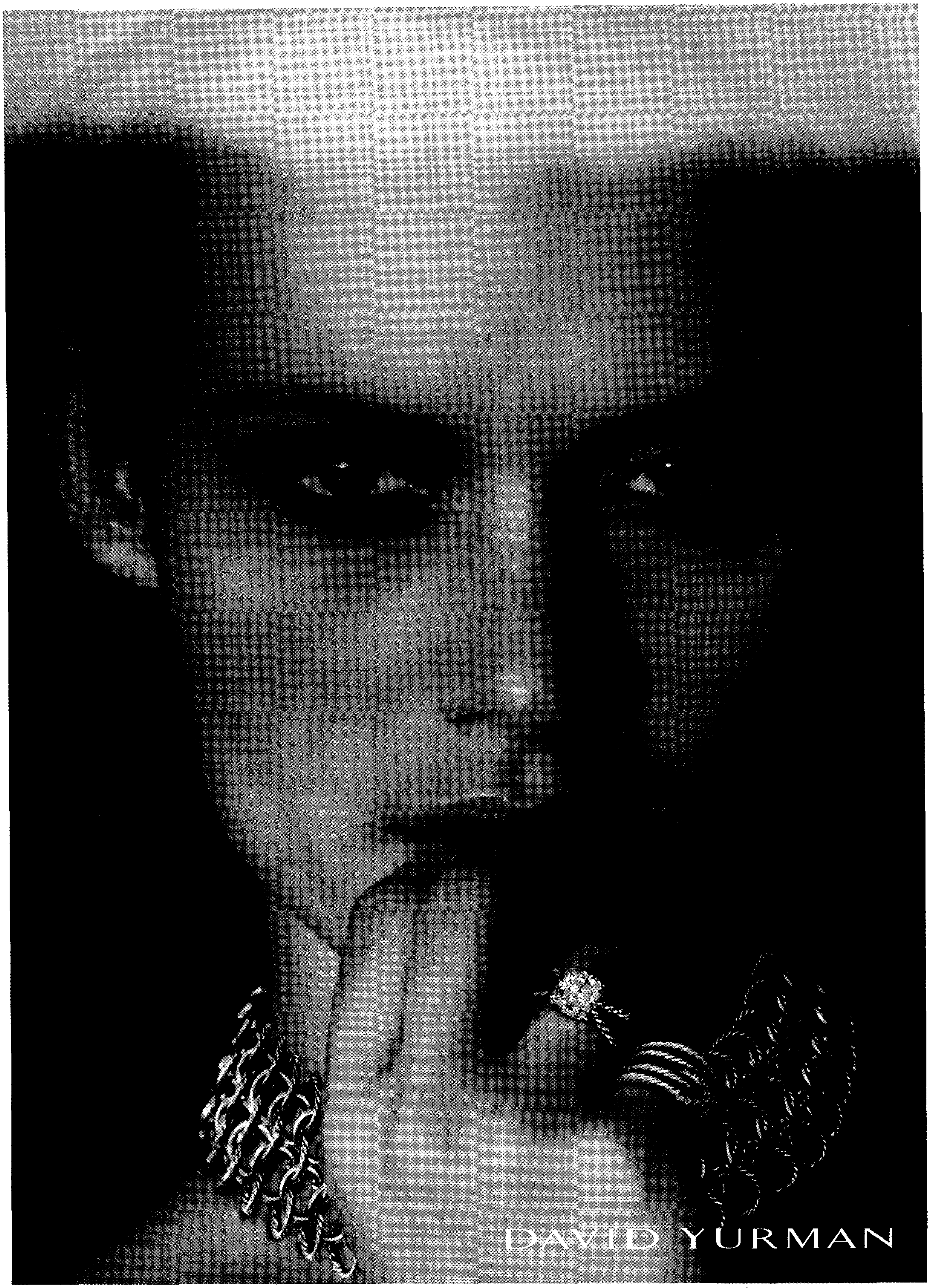
BLUE/ORANGE
At the outset of Joe Penhall's sharply funny new play, a young white psychiatrist consults his supervisor about whether he should send a young black psychiatric patient home. Their debate—over whether it's patronizing to consider the man sick in the first place—quickly spirals out of control. Penhall's script undercuts a lot of cant about race, psychiatry, power, and self-delusion, and Neil Pepe's deft direction magnifies the evening's theatrical and intellectual satisfactions. The characters are well drawn, and excellently acted, with Harold Perrineau, Jr., as the patient, Glenn Fitzgerald as the junior doctor, and Zeljko Ivanek as the mentor. (Atlantic, 336 W. 20th St. 239-6200. Closes Jan. 12.)

BLUE SKY TRANSMISSION
The Cleveland Public Theatre's production, now at LaMama, is a Western retelling of "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" (a Buddhist text about dying and rebirth) filtered through the story of a career woman who seeks to evaluate her life and face what lies ahead after she dies unexpectedly. A cast of ten uses chant, movement, dance, masks, and a variety of shoestring props in their enactment, and, while much of what is onstage seems purposely enigmatic, occasionally the visual elements come together quite beautifully. (74A E. 4th St. 475-7710.)

LA BOHÈME
The only flaw, if it is a flaw, in this ravishing zircon production is that the actors are so convincing as callow, gorgeous young self-dramatizers that you wonder if they aren't too immature to love—you almost suspect that Rodolfo and Marcello wish Mimi would hurry up and die, so they can get back to the Café Momus. But then, the joy of "La Bohème" has always been the lightness of its love. Baz Luhrmann has reset Puccini's opera in a cinematic Paris of 1957—on the eve of Godard's "Breathless"—and his *moto*-ready cast of young studs looks the part. Rodolfo and Marcello wear leather jackets and boots, Mimi sports a trench coat, and the red-hot Musetta (Jessica Comeau) has hipster slacks and an Ann-Margret kittenishness. For Musetta's splendid "Quando me'n vo," the ensemble gathers on a silverized Parisian street, where a fine powder hovers in the air, glittering. It looks like a black-and-white Doisneau shot come to life. Rodolfo (David Miller) and Mimi (Ekaterina Solovyeva) have terrific voices—Solovyeva's does things you didn't know a voice could do—and they're both eye candy: he's a young Belmondo to her Eva Marie Saint. When this Rodolfo first lays eyes on this Mimi, enough heat jumps between the two of them to melt the snowflakes. It makes you want to hop a plane to Paris—the Paris in Baz Luhrmann's mind. Note: Three rotating casts perform the lead roles. (Broadway, 1681 Broadway, at 53rd St. 239-6200.)

CHRISTMAS WITH THE CRAWFORDS
In this high-camp, low-budget holiday revue, Ethel Merman, Gloria Swanson, Carmen Miranda, et al. drop by Joan Crawford's mansion on Christmas Eve in 1944. The glamorous Joey Arias plays the arc-browed siren, and Jason Scott—a muscular blur of blond hair, white tights, and red velvet—plays Christina, recoiling acrobatically from Mommie Dearest's air punches. Of the many cameos, the best are from Chris March, who plays Shirley Temple (he must weigh three hundred pounds, and his lace-ankleted footfalls make Joan's velvet chaise longue bounce), and Nicolas Ferrer, who delivers an astonishing performance of "O Holy Night" while dressed as Hattie McDaniel. His voice has volume, heart, and a gorgeous, molten beauty—and shows that men in drag can produce moments of exaltation that transcend costume. (Producers Club II, 616 Ninth Ave. 206-1515.)

CLASS MOTHERS OF '68
Here is a show for every woman who has ever sacrificed for her kids, and every kid who should be grateful. Does that leave anyone out? On a clever set (designed by Beowulf Boritt) that shifts, scene by scene, into the living rooms and lives of six different mothers, Priscilla Lopez portrays all the moms—each made fully individual by Lopez's gift for accents and physical expression, each connected by anxiety over her child's impending high-school graduation. Eric H. Weinberger's fast-paced, good-humored script shows remarkable understanding of female character—and he could wish no better standard-bearer than Lopez; with a scritch of Vel-


DAVID YURMAN

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MADISON AT 64TH STREET SOUTH COAST PLAZA

cro and a scrabble at her coiffure, she changes from the overbearing Jewish mother of a Yale-bound *macher* to a humble Puerto Rican mama who fears her daughter will join the counterculture. To echo the working mother's dilemma: However does she do it? Directed by Jeremy Dobrish. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

CROWNS
Regina Taylor's play, based on the eponymous book by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry, is an inquiry into the aesthetic of looking good in the African-American community—what it calls "hattitude." "Crowns" is an excellent theatrical idea, but it can't decide whether it is a gospel celebration or a sociological treatise, and it feels overlong at ninety minutes. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/16/02.) (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 246-4422.)

DANCE OF THE VAMPIRES
In this new musical, based on a Roman Polanski film and directed by John Rando, Michael Crawford is Count von Krolock—an ancient vampire with a Romanian-Italian accent and a lust for the young virgin Sarah (shrilly played by Mandy Gonzalez). Most everything about the show is garish, from Ann Hould-Ward's costumes to Angelina Avallone's Day-Glo makeup to John Carrafa's "Thriller"-inspired choreography to the Halloweeny sets, by David Gallo—which are kitted out with dripping candles, dancing gargoyles, and a misty graveyard. The syrupy music and lyrics, written by the record producer Jim Steinman, are mostly incidental to the action. Only Crawford emerges unscathed from this extended Meat Loaf video, although he is onstage far less than his large fan base might appreciate. The good news is that he still knows how to stroke a song, even if the song is "Total Eclipse of the Heart"—which is reprised frequently throughout. (Minskoff, 45th St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.)

DEBBIE DOES DALLAS
A saucy postmodern musical, adapted from the porn film, and well played by Sherie Rene Scott (as Debbie), Mary Catherine Garrison, Jon Patrick Walker, Paul Fitzgerald, and others. (Jane Street Theatre, 113 Jane St. 239-6200.)

DEMOCRACY IN ISLAM
Written by Bina Sharif, who also stars, this convoluted but illuminating play is a window onto the experience of American Muslims in New York after 9/11. The first act opens with a monologue in Arabic, delivered by a spirit in a white chador who watches over a Pakistani family in the East Village. A single mother (Sharif) is raising two sons, one who wants to return to his Islamic roots, one who wants to deny them. Their domestic drama is repeatedly interrupted by paranoid newscasters, who see terrorist ties behind every headline—from the showdown with Iraq to the Beltway snipers and the collapse of Enron. Sharif's play asks not only if there is democracy in Islam but if there is democracy for Muslims in America. (Theatre for the New City, 155 First Ave. 352-3101. Closes Dec. 29.)

THE EXONERATED
Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen's pared-down play, directed by Bob Balaban, tells the harrowing stories of a handful of souls who have spent up to twenty-two years on death row before walking free. (10/28/02) (45 Bleecker Street Theatre, 45 Bleecker St. 307-4100.)

FAR AWAY
In Caryl Churchill's thrilling fable, a not-too-distant totalitarian society is engaged in a war of all against all. Humans, animals, nations, insects, the elements—even gravity—make and break alliances, with bloody consequences. The show's vivid, nightmarish centerpiece, a fashion parade of the condemned, knocks the breath out of the audience. The exceptional cast includes Frances McDormand, Marin Ireland, and Chris Messina. The show is not to be missed. Directed by Stephen Daldry. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 239-6200.)

FLOWER DRUM SONG
Part fashion show, part night-club act, part hymn to Asian-American diversity, David Henry Hwang's update of the 1958 Rodgers and Hammerstein show, set in San Francisco's Chinatown, works far better than the original. With snazzy direction and choreography by Robert Longbottom and vivacious dancing by Sandra Allen. (11/4/02) (Virginia, 245 W. 52nd St. 239-6200.)

FRANKIE AND JOHNNY IN THE CLAIR DE LUNE
Edie Falco and Stanley Tucci star in Terrence McNally's sentimental two-character study about a man and a woman marginalized by life. Joe Mantello directs. (Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

THE GENERAL FROM AMERICA
Like "Schoolhouse Rock" minus the rock, Richard Nelson's Revolutionary War drama about the traitor Benedict Arnold (Corin Redgrave) combines a history lesson with entertainment, stinting the latter. In a tar-dark theatre, lit chiefly by candles, the audience strains to catch the lesson unfolding before them—muted flickers of pewter and steel, the rustle of wool and wig, and an echo of alehouses behind dim doors. It feels like spying on a memory of another century. With Nicholas Kepros as Sir Henry Clinton, the commander of the British Army in America, who despised Arnold, and Paul Anthony McGrane as Sir Henry's beloved protégé, John Andre. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 239-6200. Closes Dec. 22.)

GONE HOME
Manhattan Theatre Club presents a play by John Corwin, directed by David Warren, about a young writer's homecoming. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

HAIRSPRAY
This musical-comedy version of the 1988 John Waters movie takes off from the opening number and never loses its momentum. In Baltimore in 1962, the rotund teen Tracy Turnblad (Marissa Jaret Winokur) wants to dance, make out with the best-looking boy in town, and integrate "The Corny Collins Show," a local teen-dance TV program. With the great Harvey Fierstein, plucked,

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Gershwin: *An American in Paris*

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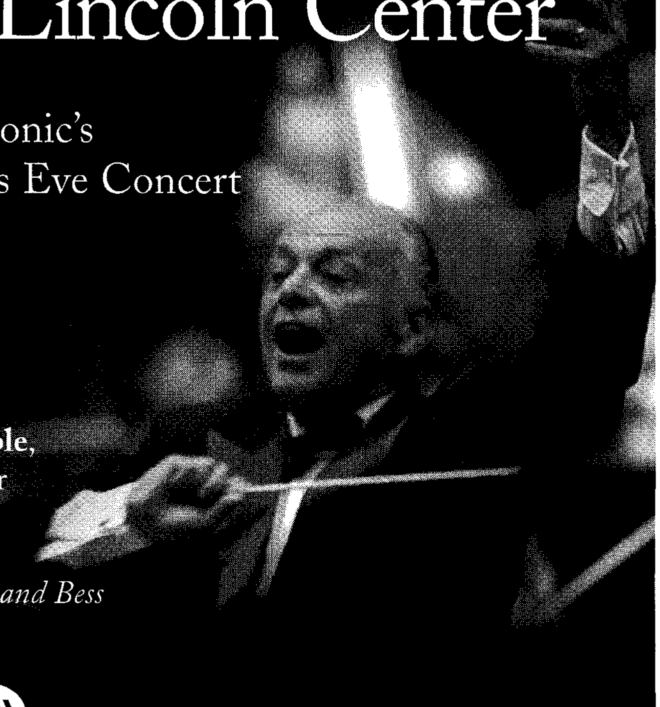

shaved, and padded, as Tracy's mother, Edna Turnblad. (9/2/02) (Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 307-4100.)

HOLLYWOOD ARMS
Carol Burnett's lightly fictionalized memoir, written with her late daughter, Carrie Hamilton, stars Linda Lavin and is directed by Harold Prince. (11/18/02) (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

IMAGINARY FRIENDS
A new play about the literary feud between Lillian Hellman and Mary McCarthy, starring Swoosie Kurtz and Cherry Jones. Written by Nora Ephron, with music by Marvin Hamlisch and lyrics by Craig Carnelia. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

JOE AND BETTY
John Diehl and Annabelle Gurwitch play the title characters in Murray Mednick's drama about a stormy marriage, set in the Catskills in the nineteen-fifties, which has moved to one of Theatre Row's new venues, the Kirk Theatre. (410 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

MAN OF LA MANCHA
If hearing "The Impossible Dream" four times without intermission is your idea of a good night out, then "Man of La Mancha" is for you. Superbly staged by Jonathan Kent and featuring a sensational set by Paul Brown that has more tricks than a circus pony, no amount of proficient talent (Brian Stokes Mitchell is the nutty knight of faith, and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio is the toothsome tart Aldonza) and no amount of high-tech prowess can disguise the fact that this Don Quixote–Sancho Panza cartoon is romantic kitsch. (Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

MEDEA
Fiona Shaw returns to New York in the acclaimed Abbey Theatre production of the Euripides play, directed by Deborah Warner, which played recently at BAM. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 307-4100.)

MOVIN' OUT
Twyla Tharp's show about small-town teen-agers coming of age during the Vietnam War era is set to twenty-seven songs by Billy Joel. The band is terrific, and the dancers—above all, John Selya as the hero, Eddie—are positively on fire. (11/4/02) (Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 307-4100.)

OUR TOWN
In a marvellous Broadway revival, directed by James Naughton, Thornton Wilder's play speaks as unforgettably now as it did at its première, in 1938. Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, is the cosmic forerunner of the comic Lake Wobegon, Minnesota; here, too, the women are strong, the men are handsome, and the children above average. As the Stage Manager—the play's narrator, and the link between the worlds of the living and the dead—Paul Newman projects half a century's expertise and good will. God should look like Newman: lean, strong-chinned, white-haired, and authoritative in a calm and unassuming way. As Emily Webb's mother, Jane Curtin is amusingly persnickety, and the romance between the young Emily (Maggie Lacey) and the strapping George Gibbs (Ben Fox) exudes decency and sweetness. (12/16/02) (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

A PURE GOSPEL CHRISTMAS
The local church singers Richard Bellizin, Arlene Frink, Darin Myers, and Debbie Otman join in a production directed by Leslie Dockery and produced by Eric Krebs, whose last collaboration was "Little Ham." (John Houseman, 450 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

THE ROAR OF THE GREASEPAINT, THE SMELL OF THE CROWD
Broadway veteran George S. Irving leads the cast in this Musicals Tonight! staging of the 1965 Leslie Bricusse–Anthony Newley hit. In this era of high-tech musicals, it's a pleasure to hear fine voices belt out show tunes in an unamplified setting. Irving, David Edwards, Jimmy Rivers, and a female chorus deliver a catchy assortment of songs, including "A Wonderful Day Like Today," "Who Can I Turn To?," and "Feeling Good." Still, Bricusse's book, a strained conceit about the Game of Life, is relentlessly allegorical. It's hard to believe that anything so jejune could have run on Broadway for two hun-

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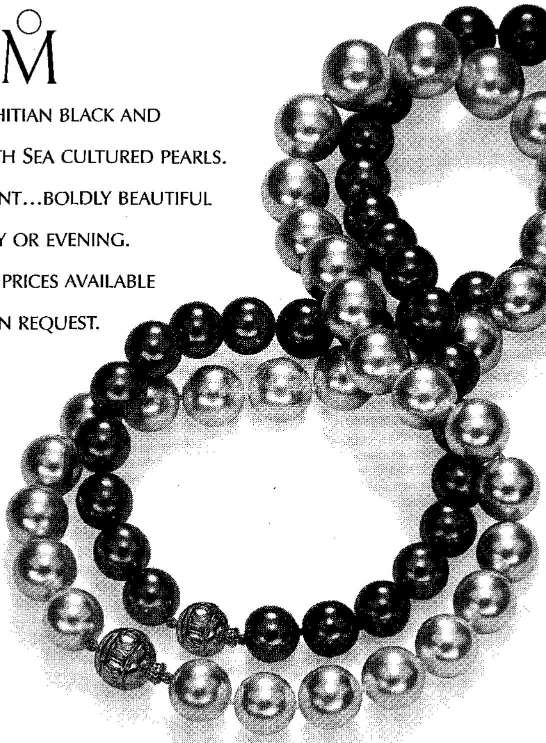

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dred and thirty-two performances, even in the sixties. (14th Street Y, 344 E. 14th St. 362-5620. Closes Dec. 22.)

RUSSELL SIMMONS' DEF POETRY JAM ON BROADWAY
The hip-hop legend has brought together spoken-word stylists from his HBO show and from the national poetry-slam circuit to create an exuberant, defiant production. The rap bards deliver poems that are part autobiography, part social commentary—addressing everything from love, America, racism, and terrorism to Krispy Kreme doughnuts. (Longacre, 220 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

SAY GOODNIGHT, GRACIE
Frank Gorshin is George Burns in Rupert Holmes's touching one-man tribute to the unsinkable comic and his more-than-a-sidekick wife, Gracie Allen. It's not just a showcase for one man; it's a showcase for an era. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

THE TEMPEST
The Pearl's season continues with Shakespeare's fantasy, directed by Padraic Lillis, with Rachel Botchan as Miranda and Robert Hock as Prospero. (80 St. Marks Pl. 598-9802.)

TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE
Based on Mitch Albom's best-selling book, the play is a love song to a wise old professor who taught an unreflective younger man how to feel. Alvin Epstein plays the mentor—Morrie Schwartz—with wit and heart, and John Tenney is touching as Mitch, the brusque mentee. Directed by David Esbjornson. (Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane, east of Sixth Ave., between W. 3rd and Bleecker Sts. 307-4100.)

WHAT DIDN'T HAPPEN
Set in 1993 and 1999 in a rustic cabin by a lake, Christopher Shinn's new play, presented by Playwrights Horizons, feels like a revisitation of "On Golden Pond," in which the central conflict isn't strife among self-centered parents and children, but strife among self-centered writers—particularly mentors and protégés. The 1999 scenes feel tacked on; the main drama occurs in 1993, when the young writer Scott (played manically by Matt McGrath) is briefly adopted by the middling writer Dave (Steven Skybell) as a handyman and disciple. When a more successful writer, Peter (Chris Noth), drops by the house, all three men bump antlers. Noth's charisma is huge; when he enters, all crinkled eyes and easy swagger, he bears the assurance of an alpha stag claiming his crag. His monologue about a lesson he learned from a wise groupie is exceptional. (The Duke, 229 W. 42nd St. 239-6200. Closes Dec. 22.)

LONG RUNS

AIDA
Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 307-4747.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 307-4747.

BLUE MAN GROUP/TUBES
Astor Place Theatre, 434 Lafayette St. 254-4370.

CABARET
Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 239-6200.

CHICAGO
Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (ABRIDGED)
Century Center, 111 E. 15th St. 239-6200.

DE LA GUARDA
Daryl Roth, 20 Union Sq. E., at 15th St. 239-6200.

FORBIDDEN BROADWAY: 20TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION
Douglas Fairbanks, 432 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.

42ND STREET
Ford Center, 213 W. 42nd St. 307-4100.

THE GRADUATE
Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

I LOVE YOU, YOU'RE PERFECT, NOW CHANGE
Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.

INTO THE WOODS
Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

CLASSICAL NOTES

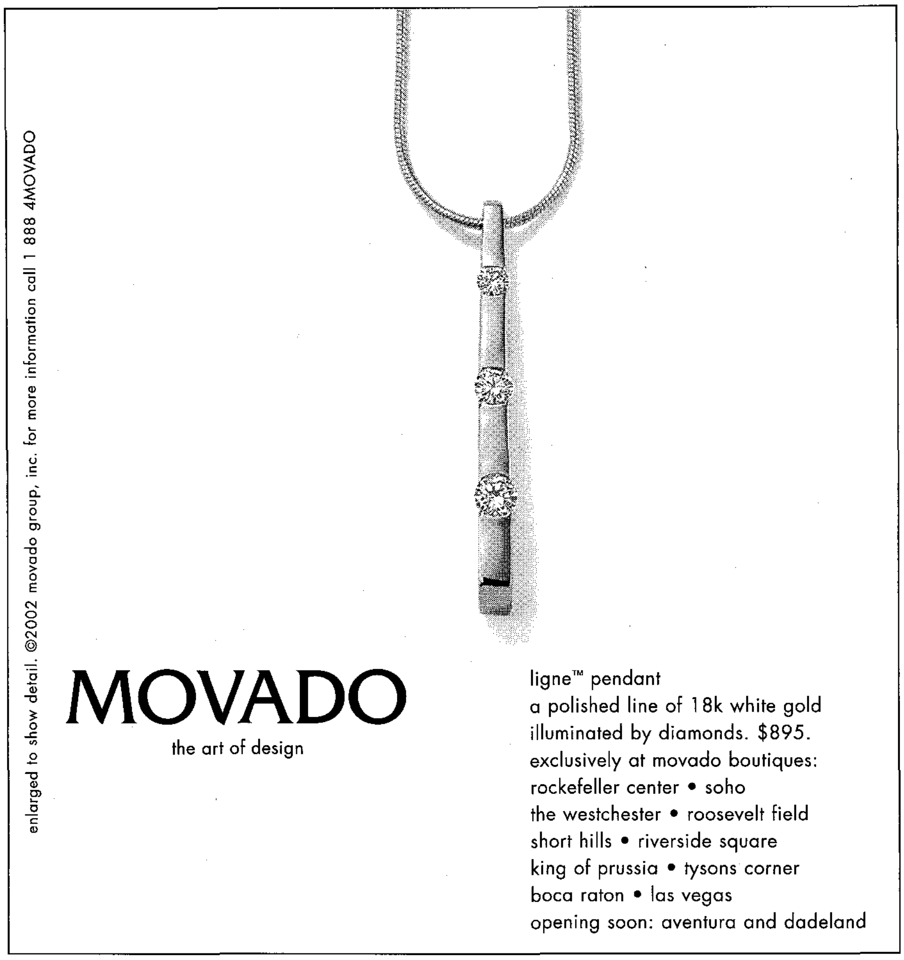
WAGNER, UNINTERRUPTED

Since purchasing a complete recording of Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung" cycle is not a decision to be made lightly, generations of listeners have turned to Georg Solti's nineteen-sixties recording on Decca: it's still the best one around. But **"Wagner: The Opera Collection"** (Decca), a glorious Solti set of the six non-"Ring" operas (recorded with the Vienna Philharmonic and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra), shows how dicey the boxed-set concept can be in the classical sphere, since the stylistic range of the works—from the ruddy, Weber-like Romanticism of "The Flying Dutchman" (1843) to the mystical, Lisztian ether of "Parsifal" (1882)—is so broad.

The 1960 "Tristan und Isolde" boasts a Birgit Nilsson in her prime (she's all woman, not Kirsten Flagstad's wide-eyed adolescent), but the newly digitized sound only intensifies the typically fast and rugged Solti style, which is inappropriate for the most romantic of the composer's operas. The other recordings, however, come off beautifully. The 1970 "Tannhäuser," for example, has long been regarded as a classic (René Kollo's hard-edged tenor was rarely this sweet), and although the "Parsifal," from 1972, doesn't attempt to conjure up that opera's uniquely glowing sound, Christa Ludwig, Gottlob Frick, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (as Kundry, Gurnemanz, and Amfortas, respectively) are all superb—and Solti's tight pacing will be a relief to those who have wearied of the ponderous tempos of James Levine. The most recent recording, a 1995 concert version of "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg," makes for a splendid coda. Solti may keep a tight rein on his Chicago players, but he allows a stellar modern cast—including Karita Mattila, Ben Heppner, José van Dam, and René Pape—to bring an almost conversational nuance to Wagner's most humane and generous score.

—*Russell Platt*

THE LION KING
New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 307-4100.
LOVE, JANIS
Village Theatre, 158 Bleecker St. 307-4100.
MAMMA MIA!
Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 563-5544.
METAMORPHOSES
Circle in the Square, 50th St. west of Broadway. 239-6200.
LES MISÉRABLES
Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 239-6200.
OKLAHOMA!
Gershwin, 51st St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.
PERFECT CRIME
Duffy, 1553 Broadway, at 46th St. 695-3401.
THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA
Majestic, 245 W. 44th St. 239-6200.
THE PRODUCERS
St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 239-6200.
PROOF
Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 239-6200.
PUPPETRY OF THE PENIS
John Houseman, 450 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.
RENT
Nederlander, 208 W. 41st St. 921-8000.
STOMP
Orpheum, 126 Second Ave., at 8th St. 477-2477.
THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLIE
Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 307-4100.
TONY N' TINA'S WEDDING
St. Luke's Church, 308 W. 46th St. 239-6200.
UNDERNEATH THE LINTEL
Soho Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 239-6200.
URINETOWN
Henry Miller, 124 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.
THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES
Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.



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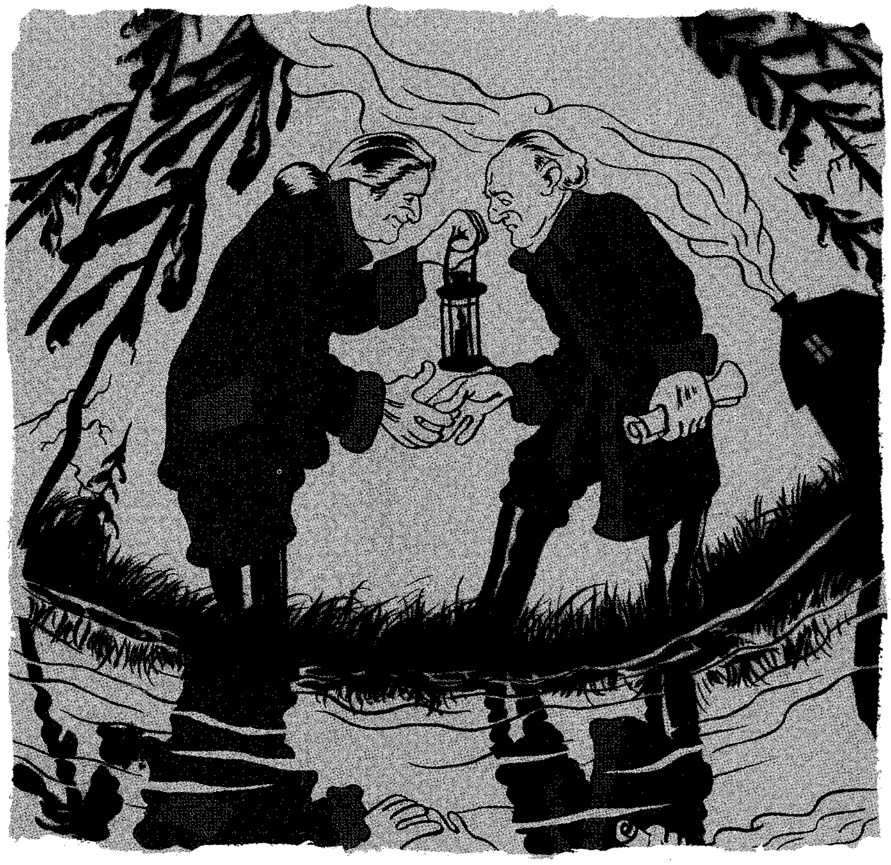

"The General from America," at the Lucille Lortel (see Theatre).

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
In Balanchine's "Nutcracker," the Christmas party is gemütlich, the nightmare scary, the tree tall, and Candyland exactly what it should be: a child's dream of heaven. Tchaikovsky wrote the music at the peak of his powers as a fabulist, and Balanchine's imagination rose to meet it. (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 870-5570. Dec. 18-19, Dec. 26, and Dec. 30 at 6; Dec. 20 and Dec. 27 at 8; Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 2 and 8; Dec. 22 and Dec. 29 at 1 and 5; and Dec. 31 at 2 and 7.)

"THE HARD NUT"
"SEE the rat queen's horrible mutant offspring!" read the poster at the première, in 1991. That's the tone—hilariously, comic-bookishly crass—of the first act of Mark Morris's "Nutcracker" update. The Christmas party is set in the nineteen-seventies, with bell-bottoms and a dancing Barbie (who gets her arm torn off by a robot at the end of her number). But in the "Waltz of the Snowflakes," as men and women in tutus hurl fistfuls of snow, acridness meets sweetness, and the ballet tips over, becoming what all good "Nutcracker"s are: a serious meditation on love. Once it was alternative, but now "The Hard Nut" is a classic in its own right. (BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4100. Dec. 18-20 at 7:30, Dec. 21 at 2 and 7:30, and Dec. 22 at 3.)

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE
The City Center season continues, with twenty-one productions, including both new and repertory works, choreographed by Ohad Naharin, Lynne Taylor-Corbett, Francesca Harper, and others. ◆ Dec. 18 at 8: "Chocolate Sessions," "Cry," "Vespers," and "The Winter in Lisbon." ◆ Dec. 19 at 8: "Revelations" and other Ailey classics. ◆ Dec. 20 at 8: "Episodes," "Shelter," and "Grace." ◆ Dec. 21 at 2: "The River," "Love Songs," "Cry," and "Revelations." ◆ Dec. 21 at 8: "Revelations" and other Ailey classics. ◆ Dec. 22 at 3: "The River," "Memoria," and "Revelations." ◆ Dec. 22 at 7:30: "Chocolate Sessions," "Black Milk," "Vespers," and "Revelations." ◆ Dec. 24 at 8: "Night Creature," "Treading," "The Winter in Lisbon," and "Revelations." ◆ Dec. 25 at 8: "Memoria," "Black Milk," and "Revelations." ◆ Dec. 26 at 8: "Serving Nia," "Chocolate Sessions," "Episodes," and "Caravan." ◆ Dec. 27 at 8: "Following the Subtle Current Upstream," "Episodes," and "Revelations." ◆ Dec. 28 at 2: "Revelations" and other Ailey classics. ◆ Dec. 28 at 8: "Caravan," "Shelter," and "Grace." ◆ Dec. 29 at 3: "Prayers from the Edge," "Apex," and "The Winter in Lisbon."◆ Dec. 29 at 7:30: "Serving Nia," "Sweet Bitter Love," "Vespers," and "Revelations." ◆ Dec. 31 at 8: "The Winter in Lisbon," "Serving Nia," and "Revelations." (131 W. 55th St. 581-1212. Through Jan. 5.)

NEW SHANGHAI CIRCUS
Twenty Chinese acrobats, contortionists, and tumblers ring out the Year of the Horse during their monthlong visit to the New Victory Theatre. (229 W. 42nd St. 239-6200. Dec. 18-20 at 7; Dec. 21 and Dec. 26-28 at 2 and 7; Dec. 22, Dec. 29, and Dec. 31 at noon and 5; and Dec. 24 at 2. Through Jan. 12.)

"ANTIGONE: THE TIN CAN TIED TO HER OWN DAMN TAIL"
Big Dance Theatre's nimble production of Mac Wellman's riff on the Sophocles tragedy uses a dance logic of quick, resonant transition to travel from silliness to elegy. Rebecca Wisocky plays a grouchy and perplexed Creon; Didi O'Connell's Antigone is a quiet, world-weary mystery. Directed by Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 924-0077. Dec. 19-21 at 7 and Dec. 22 at 2.)

"THE BOTTOMLAND"
Doug Varone's dancers create a fable of backwoods America, set in and around Kentucky's Mammoth Caves and performed to music by Patty Loveless and Gaétan Leboeuf. The dancers move with fluidity and submission, falling to the ground emphatically and rising again renewed. Geography, Varone shows, is their trap and their refuge. (Ohio, 66 Wooster St. 279-4200. Dec. 18-20 at 8, Dec. 21 at 7:30 and 10, and Dec. 22 at 4 and 7.)

"DANCE IN PROGRESS"
The Kitchen presents the work in progress of four choreographers in a seasonal showcase. For "Perception Has Got to Have a Body" (the second section of a triptych about the life of Helen Keller), Daria Faïn creates a disorienting series of tableaux vivants. Early on, Annie Sullivan (Aleta Hayes) and Keller (Amy Cox) toss and tackle each other, duelling as they dance. Later, Keller stretches out her arms to feel a life-size diagram of her body, delineated in Braille dots, then starts playing with the dots like someone in a frenzied game of Twister. Other choreographers in the showcase are Sam Kim, Judith Sanchez-Ruiz, and Julie Tolentino. (512 W. 19th St. 255-5793, ext. 11. Dec. 18-19 at 8.)

"GLOBAL EXCHANGE"
A boat glides across a wooden floor, carrying a silent trio, and, in a video projection, a naked woman kisses a stone gargoyle—in outer space. In a mystical multimedia work inspired by everything from Taoist and Indian texts to Eugene O'Neill's play "Desire Under the Elms" and, according to the Chinese choreographer, Yin Mei, "the cosmos," dancers take a contemplative journey colored by the animation of the artist Tennessee Dixon and lit (in part) by the moonlight that filters through St. Mark's rose window. Accompanied by the sounds of sitar, bass, and bamboo flute, Yin and her dancers move delicately, brushing elbows, spreading their fingers, and bending their bodies into soft creases. Part of Danspace Project's Global Exchange series, the piece is very much a work in progress, and shares the bill with two solos by Elisabetta Vittoni, visiting from Italy, with video by Massimo Sommovigo. (St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. 674-8194. Dec. 20-22 at 8:30.)

MOSCOW BALLET
A restaged version of Marius Petipa's original "Nutcracker" comes to Brooklyn, performed by dancers from the country where it was first staged. (Whitman Theatre, Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts, Brooklyn College. 718-951-4500. Dec. 22 at 2.)

FORCES OF NATURE
For its twenty-second annual Kwanza celebration, Abdel R. Salaam's troupe presents selections from its repertory. "Rhythm Legacy" traces African influences on contemporary music and dance—juxtaposing, for example, the Dan dances of Dahomey with the snakehips of the Harlem Renaissance. The ease with which the African vocabulary merges with hip-hop in the dance's final scene underlines the continuity of the old tradition, and the sincere abandon of the dancers teaches the lesson through joy. (Aaron Davis Hall, W. 135th St. at Convent Ave. 650-7100. Dec. 28 at 7:30.)

MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCE COMPANY
Cunningham dances aren't typically kid-friendly. But last September, Patricia Lent, a former Cunningham dancer and a schoolteacher, took her third graders to watch a few of them, just the same. "After 9/11, we'd moved to a different school and were stuffed in a room with two other classes," Lent says. "I thought, It won't be dreary and scary at the Cunningham studio." The children adored the vast space, and they also took to the dances: "The things adults worry about when they see Merce's work—the lack of story, or the fact that it doesn't go with the music—didn't faze them." Now, thirteen of the students will perform with the company inside the translucent space-age pods that house the Annie Leibovitz exhibition "Rewarding Lives," at the American Express building in the World Financial Center. There's a bonus treat on Dec. 20 at 4: Mikhail Baryshnikov and Susan Sontag talk with the choreographer on the site. All events are free but require reservations. (200 Vesey St. 255-8240, ext. 24. Dec. 18-20 at 7.)

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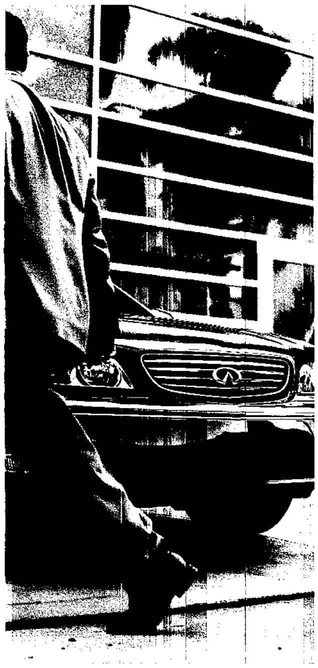

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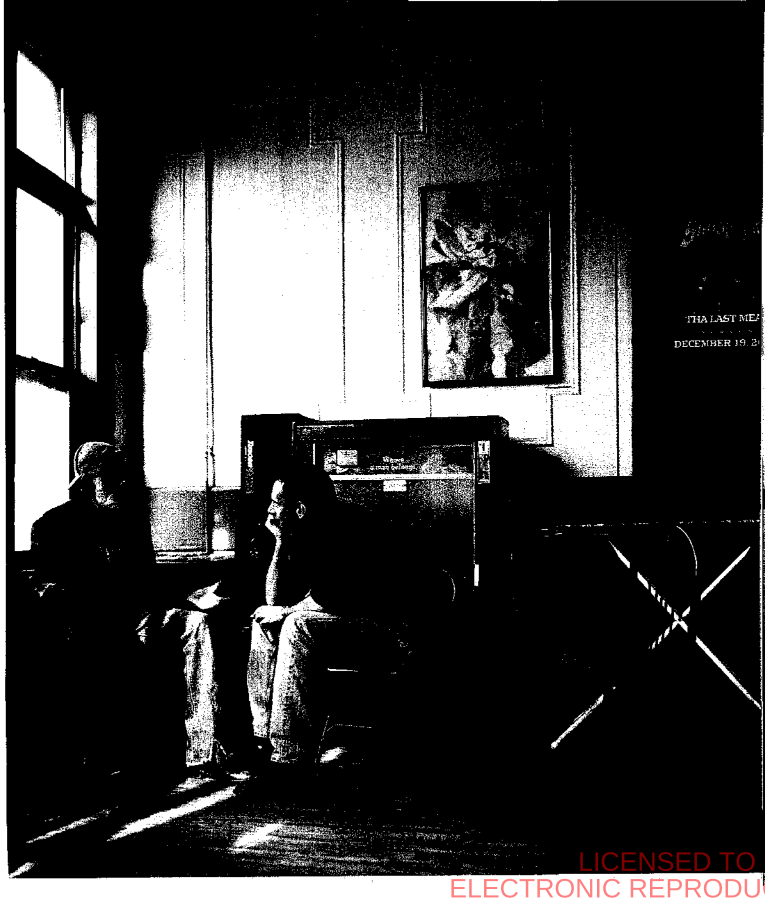
Recognizing the mistreatment of the poor and people of color that often plagues the legal system, lawyer Bryan Stevenson, Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative of Alabama and Associate Professor at NYU School of Law, has been instrumental in overturning dozens of capital murder cases and death sentences where indigent people have been unconstitutionally convicted or sentenced.

Dave Isay's Sound Portraits Productions makes radio documentaries that celebrate and amplify the voices of the voiceless. Their stories of men and women surviving on the margins of American society have been broadcast on NPR and archived on the Web. Told with care and dignity, these tone portraits open windows on worlds rarely seen—and even more rarely understood.

DAVE ISAY



CAMERON SINCLAIR

As the founder of Architecture for Humanity, Cameron Sinclair actively promotes architectural and design solutions to global, social, and humanitarian problems. Among projects developed by this visionary nonprofit organization are transitional housing for returning refugees in Kosovo and mobile health clinics to combat the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa.

John Mroz founded the EastWest Institute in 1981 in an effort to defuse Cold War tensions by providing constructive diplomatic thinking. Today, this potent nonprofit continues to offer governments ideas and implementation of programs with the express goal of building democracy and promoting free enterprise in Eastern Europe, Russia, and throughout Eurasia.

JOHN EDWIN MROZ

Photography by Greg Mille

THE MAGEES

Dr. William Magee, Jr. & Kathleen Magee. A plastic surgeon and a nurse/social worker, this husband and wife team founded Operation Smile to provide corrective surgery to children with facial deformities. Since it was founded in 1982, Operation Smile has lit up the faces of tens of thousands of children in twenty countries.

One of the world's top neurosurgeons specializing in the removal of brain tumors, Keith Black has made an impact in both the operating theatre and the research arena at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. Black has pioneered protocols enabling chemotherapeutic drugs to be delivered directly into brain tumors and is developing a vaccine to enhance a body's immune response to cancer.

KEITH BLACK

MICHAEL HAWLEY

Michael Hawley has been instrumental in founding and directing creative research thrusts like "Things That Think" and "Toys of Tomorrow" at the MIT Media Lab. But his innovations extend beyond Cambridge. He founded Friendly Planet, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting and connecting schools in developing countries, like Cambodia and Bhutan.

The founding executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Samantha Power is the author of *"A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide."* As one who has exposed the nation's reluctance to fulfill the promise of "never again," Power is a persuasive advocate for intervention abroad to prevent future atrocities.

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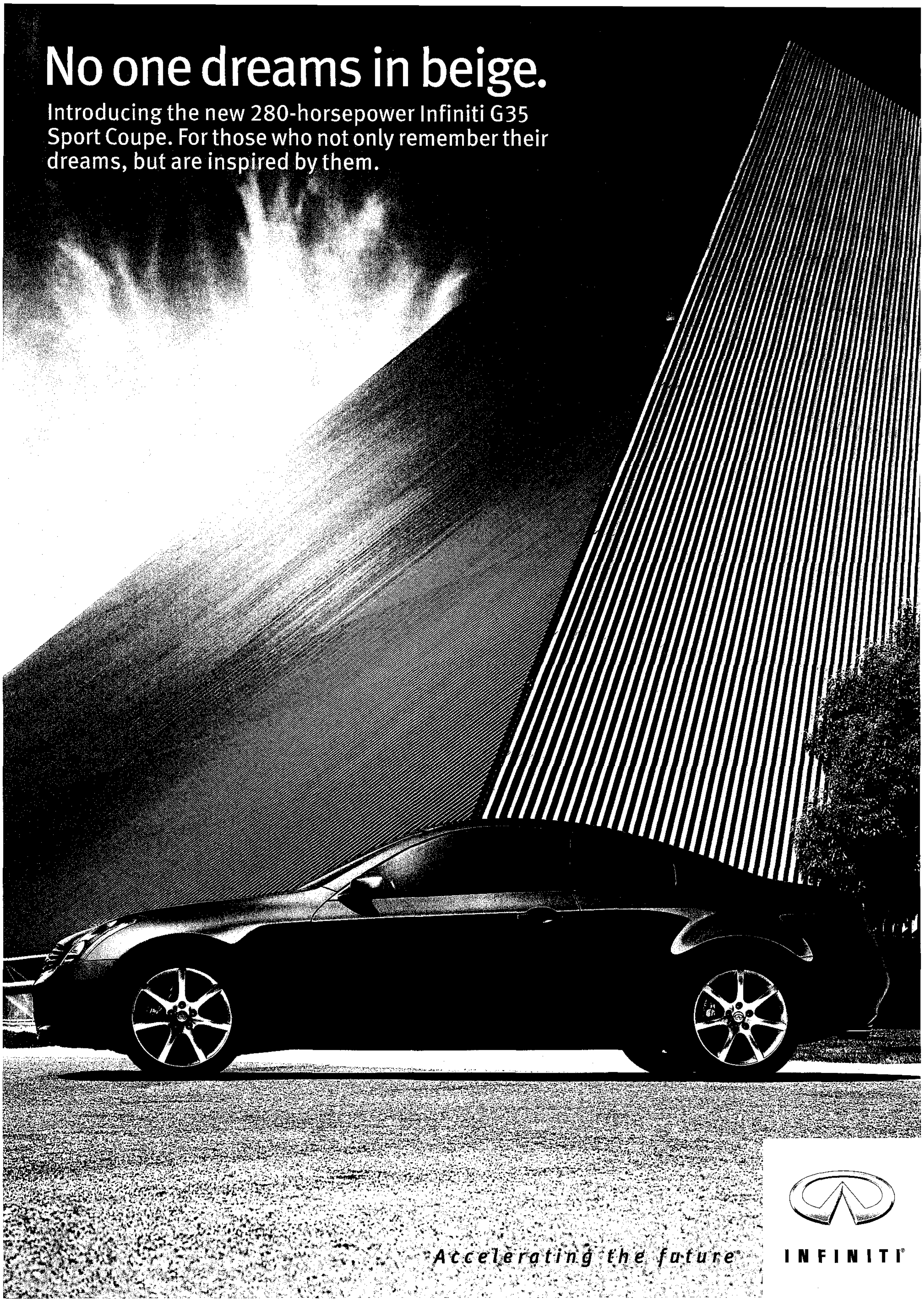

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D.M.B. has achieved global prominence. (Madison Square Garden. 307-7171. Dec. 20-21 at 7:30.)

DARLENE LOVE
The singer whose voice was one of the birth cries of rock and roll (her Phil Spector-produced hits include "He's a Rebel" and "He's Sure the Boy I Love"), and who's backed everyone from Sam Cooke and Elvis Presley to Cher, spreads a little seasonal cheer. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 864-5400. Dec. 20-21 at 8.)

GOV'T MULE
The bristling Allman Brothers offshoot, led by the slide guitarist Warren Haynes. (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. Dec. 30 at 8 and Dec. 31 at 9.)

PHISH
Vermont's favorite laid-back, jam-happy combo returns. (Madison Square Garden. Dec. 31 at 8.)

CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (997-4144)—Dec. 30-31: **Karl Denson's Tiny Universe.** The jazz saxophonist Denson, who contributed to Lenny Kravitz's early albums (that solo on "Let Love Rule" belongs to him), was one of the founders of the early-nineties acid-jazz group the Greyboy Allstars. Since then Denson has grown increasingly funky, and with his Tiny Universe band he's turned his dedication to dance grooves into an underground success with jam-band fans across the country.

BOTTOM LINE
15 W. 4th St., at Mercer St. (228-6300)—Dec. 27: The proto-punk poet **Jim Carroll** and the avant-garde guitarist **Marc Ribot** are two luminaries of Manhattan's downtown Bohemia. They may not exactly be household names, but their hipster street cred spans several decades. Dec. 30-31: **Buddy and Julie Miller** are a pair of longtime Nashville session musicians who also happen to be husband and wife. Their musical partnership is perfect harmonic bliss.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (533-2111)—Dec. 19-21: The Anglophilic locals in **Interpol** hark back to the bygone eighties, minus an annoying retro-kitsch vibe. The boys evoke that era's post-punk godhead, Joy Division, in their stark tone and sharp-dressed sombreness. Dec. 27: In typically independent fashion, the record label Def Jux throws a Christmas party two days late. But it's a worthy cap to a year that has seen the fledgling company introduce albums from many of underground hip-hop's best performers. **Mr. Lif's** conscientious political rhymes are crowd favorites, **Aesop Rock** strikes a more confessional note, and **RJD2** is a d.j. with an ear for flow. But the biggest holiday cheers will be reserved for **El-P,** founder of the label, whose intensely bitter intonation and rhymes overloaded with syllables produced one of the year's most striking albums, "Fantastic Damage." Dec. 30-31: The punk matriarch **Patti Smith.**

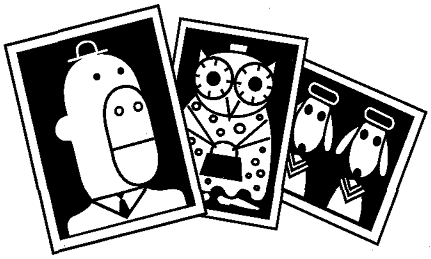
IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (777-6800)—Dec. 27-28: The unapologetically quirky duo of John Flansburgh and John Linnell has been making willfully clever, skewed pop since the mid-eighties, and by many measures their band, **They Might Be Giants,** has become the Led Zeppelin of "nerd rock." With the **Trachtenburg Family Slideshow Players,** featuring the eight-year-old drummer Rachel Trachtenburg.

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—Dec. 28: The Washington a-cappella outfit **DaVinci's Notebook.** Dec. 24: The songwriter series "What I Like About Jew" features **Sean Altman, Rob Tannenbaum,** and others performing such future holiday classics as "Reuben the Hook-Nosed Reindeer" and "(It's Good to Be) A Jew at Christmas." Dec. 31: The sallow-faced, darkly charismatic Eugene Hutz—equal parts Sid Vicious and Bertolt Brecht—stops by with **Gogol Bordello,** a five-man band specializing in what it calls "Ukrainian Gypsy surrealistic punk cabaret."

BOOK CURRENTS

Animal Form

While most wildlife photography tends to explain things—showing how animals hunt, migrate, breed, and so on—some photographers prefer a more unconventional approach. In Walter Schels's **ANIMAL PORTRAITS** (Edition Stemmle), a cavalcade of goats, cats, primates, and others get the Avedon treatment, photographed in black-and-white and usually staring straight at the camera. It becomes hard not to read human character into the animals who "sit" for their portraits, when we see, for instance, the quizzical glance of a drooling cheetah, or the sedate, professorial pose of a bear.



RICHARD MC GUIRE

If Schels creates portraits, the German photographer Pete Dine, in **ANIMALS ON WHITE** (Edition Stemmle), transforms his subjects into still-life, painstakingly shooting them in a portable all-white studio. The result highlights not character but form—color, movement, and beauty. Dine has a taste for rare breeds like the Baldinger Tiger pig, the majestic Charolais bull, and the Przewalski horse, the wild Mongolian ancestor of the domestic horse.

No photographer turns animals into art more completely than Frans Lanting, whose remarkable **JUNGLES** (Taschen) represents two decades of work. Often heightening the animal kingdom's own visual flair, Lanting shows how, in closeup, a toucan's head becomes an abstract composition of circles and stripes. Most extraordinary of all, perhaps, is a photograph of macaws over a Peruvian river. Lanting shoots from a scaffold a hundred feet above the yellow-brown waters, and in the resulting image the birds no longer even seem three-dimensional, but look more like a design on a Japanese screen.

—*Leo Carey*

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AND: A calendar of
New Yorker events
across the country

MERCURY LOUNGE
217 E. Houston St. (260-4700)—Dec. 30-31: The local heroes in **Longwave** weave a broad sonic tapestry with their guitars.

NORTHSIX
66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg (718-599-5103)—Dec. 19: The downtown aesthetes **Les Savy Fav** traffic in murky, guitar-based rock with angry-young-man leanings. Dec. 21: The Brooklyn-based ensemble **Ladybug Transistor** recall the time, just a few years ago, when careful melancholy, rather than searing rock and roll, was the local fashion. Their charming arrangements avoid the sugary sensibility that dooms many similar pop outfits.

TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (358-7503)—Dec. 22: **Barbez** includes a brilliant theremin player who smokes cigarettes and a full-throated Russian singer who comes across like Joan of Arc with a sense of humor. They cover everything from Bertolt Brecht to Black Sabbath, but the real attraction is their melodically haunting originals. With a folk-music sound located somewhere between turn-of-the-century Eastern Europe and modern America, it's arty rock that moves between brooding and winking. Sharing the bill is the young unclassifiable singer-songwriter **Devendra Banhart.**

WARSAW
261 Driggs Ave., Brooklyn (718-387-0505)—Dec. 20-21: Though Love's 1967 album, "Forever Changes," has been called one of the finest rock albums of all time, the psychedelic garage-rock band never quite escaped cult status. The band was inspirational for its fusion of folk, rock, and psychedelia as well as its racially integrated ranks, and the front man, Arthur Lee, has since reconvened Love to mark the thirty-fifth anniversary of "Forever Changes."

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (840-6800)—The cabaret icon **Andrea Marcovicci,** currently at work in the woody nook known as the Oak Room, may not always have a dulcet tone, but her masterly interpretive skills and her charming way with an anecdote more than compensate for the rough spots in her delivery. She's performing the can't-lose love songs of Cole Porter through Jan. 11.

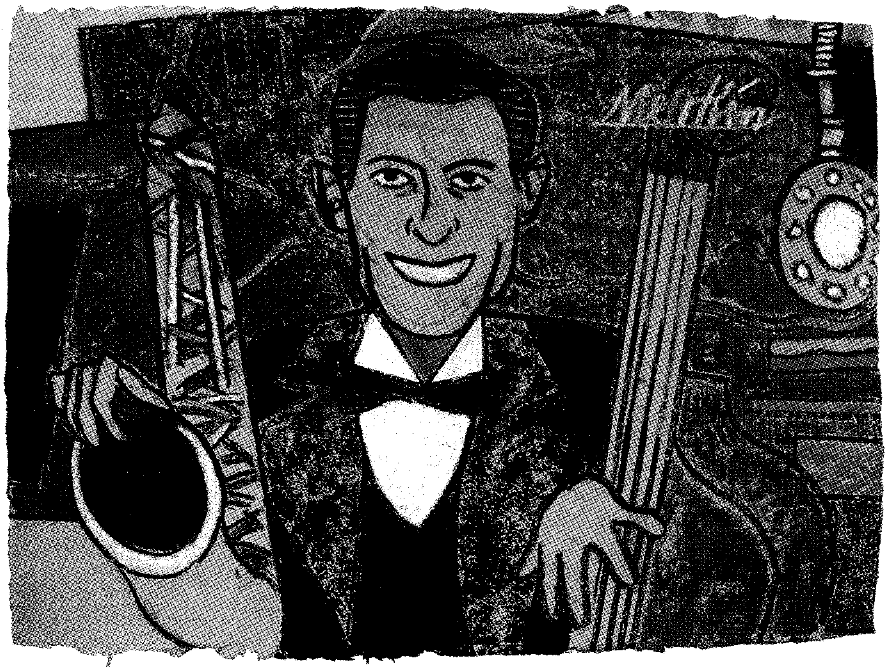
BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (475-8592)—Through Dec. 22: The heated debates about whether **Jane Monheit** is a force of good or evil for jazz singing are just about over; the Long Island native with the sweet, sure voice is here to stay. And with a repertoire that mixes tried-and-true standards with singer-songwriter faves from the seventies, she neither offends nor excites. Dec. 27-29: The vocal group **Manhattan Transfer** continues its thirtieth-anniversary celebration.

CAJUN
129 Eighth Ave., at 16th St. (691-6174)—It's not as if **Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks** are obsessed with the music of the twenties and thirties—they've even been known to slip in a number or two from the forties as well. Manning the most unwieldy of instruments (bass, tuba, bass saxophone) as well as a bulbous vintage Kellogg microphone, Giordano leads a tuxedo-clad twelve-piece band whose ease with early jazz and swing breathes life into an overlooked era. Authenticity and affection, rather than nostalgia and affectation, are what power this valuable and enjoyable ensemble. They're here on Mondays and Thursdays. The rest of the week features combos fluent in Dixieland jazz and other improvisational sounds of New Orleans.

CARLYLE HOTEL
Madison Ave. at 76th St. (744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features the magisterially puckish **Bobby Short** and his mini big band through Dec. 31. Ever the showman, Short delivers a choice slate of Depression-era show tunes with boundless enthusiasm, his trademark razor-sharp timing, a broad smile, and animated eyebrows. He may be a paragon of sophistication, but the high point of the show comes from lower precincts as he closes with a resounding rendition of Wesley (Sox) Wilson's party anthem, made famous by Bessie Smith, "Gimme a Pigfoot." ♦ Across the hall, in Bemelmans Bar, the **Loston Harris** trio is in attendance.

FEINSTEIN'S AT THE REGENCY
540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (339-4095)—Through Dec. 28: The poised and likable balladeer **Michael Feinstein** presents a program that includes holiday fare as well as a special tribute to his friend and mentor, the late Rosemary Clooney. His special guest, **Gloria Reuben,** who may be best known for her dramatic stint on "E.R.," branches out into the vocal realm. Dec. 31: With a gruff-edged, Dr. John-like tone that reveals his Big Easy roots, the lightly swinging **Steve Tyrell** rings in the new year.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (582-2121)—Through Dec. 22: The **Ahmad Jamal** trio. Instead of mellowing with time, Jamal gets more eccentric. A charming minimalist back in the fifties, the pianist has metamorphosed into a verbose extrovert with his own game plan of stop-and-start rhythms, mood-swing digressions, and catch-me-if-you-can shenanigans with his sidemen. Dec. 24-29: The **McCoy Tyner** big band. And you thought pianist Tyner stirred up some sound with just a trio. His big band, which has included whooping soloists like the trumpeter Eddie Henderson, the trombonists Frank Lacy and Steve Turre, and the saxophonist John Stubblefield, may be just a side project for Tyner, but he revels in every celebratory second of it. Dec. 31-Jan. 5: Tyner exchanges his big band for his trio, with the saxophonist **Michael Brecker.** For his many fans who acknowledge Brecker as John Coltrane's heir, this is a dream gig: their hero standing shoulder to shoulder with Coltrane's iconic pianist. Those with a little more objectivity will at least appreciate Brecker's bravery in sharing a stage with the mighty Tyner. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.**



Vince Giordano leads the Nighthawks, at Cajun on Mondays and Thursdays.

RICHARD MERKIN

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (576-2232)—Through Dec. 22: **Ann Hampton Callaway** gets to display jazz inclinations far too infrequently. Backed here by a topflight band, the mellifluous singer will be sure to strut her stuff. Dec. 26-29: The **Winard Harper** sextet. Harper was the drum-playing sibling in the Harper Brothers, one of the first neo-traditional jazz bands to gain attention. Now a veteran, he's sure to have some eager young players on the bandstand looking for wisdom and direction.

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—Dec. 21-25: The **Jewsapalooza** series presents more wonderfully warped klezmer and progressive Jewish jazz than you can shake a dreidel at. Highlights include Pharaoh's Daughter on Dec. 21, Ehran Elisha's Kinetic Music on Dec. 22, Burton Greene's Klez-thetics, direct from Holland, on Dec. 23, and Hasidic New Wave on Dec. 25. For Christmas Eve, see Clubs, above.

TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (358-7503)—Dec. 21: The **Jane Ira Bloom** trio. A formidable improviser with a full-blooded tone that sets her apart from the Coltrane-obsessed soprano-sax players clogging the airwaves, Bloom has been even more adventurous recently, testing herself against edgier players and succeeding admirably. Dec. 27-28: Henry Threadgill's latest band, **Zooid,** is your basic saxophone, oud, tuba, guitar, cello, and drums outfit. His new album, "Up Popped the Two Lips," confirms that this slinky, utterly distinctive, and disarmingly engaging unit is among the finest ensembles that this key composer-improviser has yet devised. Dec. 31: **Electric Masada** turns plugged-in power on the storehouse of Jewish-tinged original melodies that **John Zorn** dispenses among his myriad ensembles; featured players include the guitarist **Marc Ribot** (who will also lead his own trio this evening) and the trumpeter **Dave Douglas.**

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (255-4037)—For two weeks, the pianist **Cedar Walton** will be at the helm of the Vanguard's hallowed bandstand, and the club couldn't be in better hands. This deft stylist's playing and compositions have enlivened modern jazz since the early sixties. Through Dec. 22: **Jackie McLean,** a legendary alto saxophonist who honed his art alongside Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins, joins Walton's sleek trio. Dec. 24-29: **Vincent Herring,** a younger player whose pointed tone and biting phrasing demand an audience's ear, takes over on the saxophone. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (879-5500)—**"The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353."** From a show named after a man on the move, you'd expect what? Gilded tent flaps? They're here, but the focus is on an urbane, nearly

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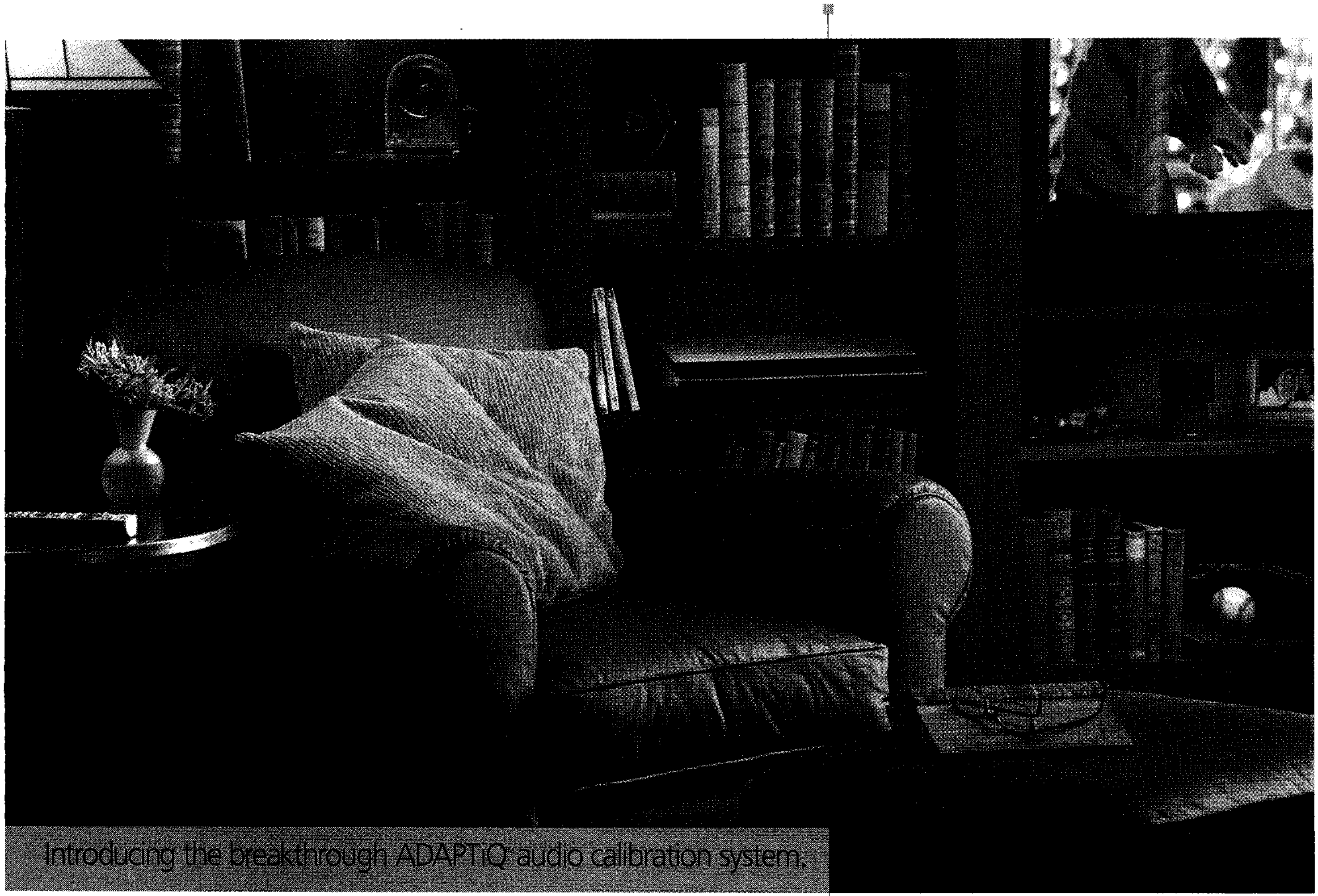

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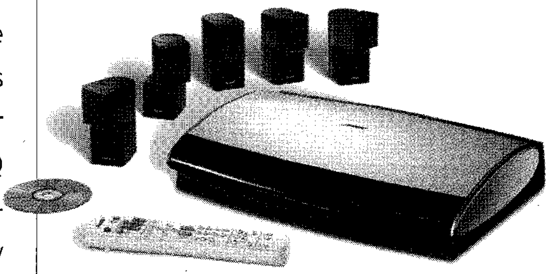

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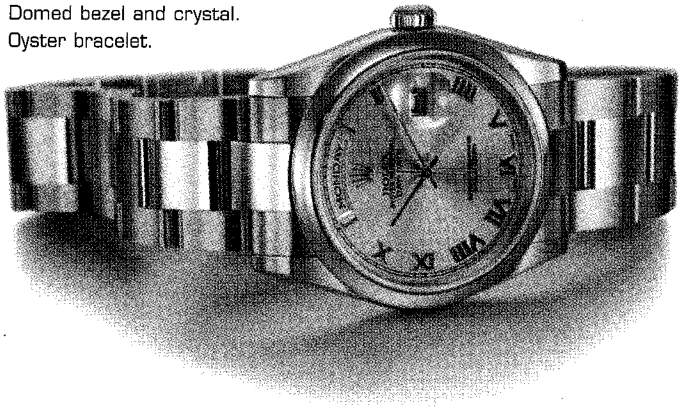

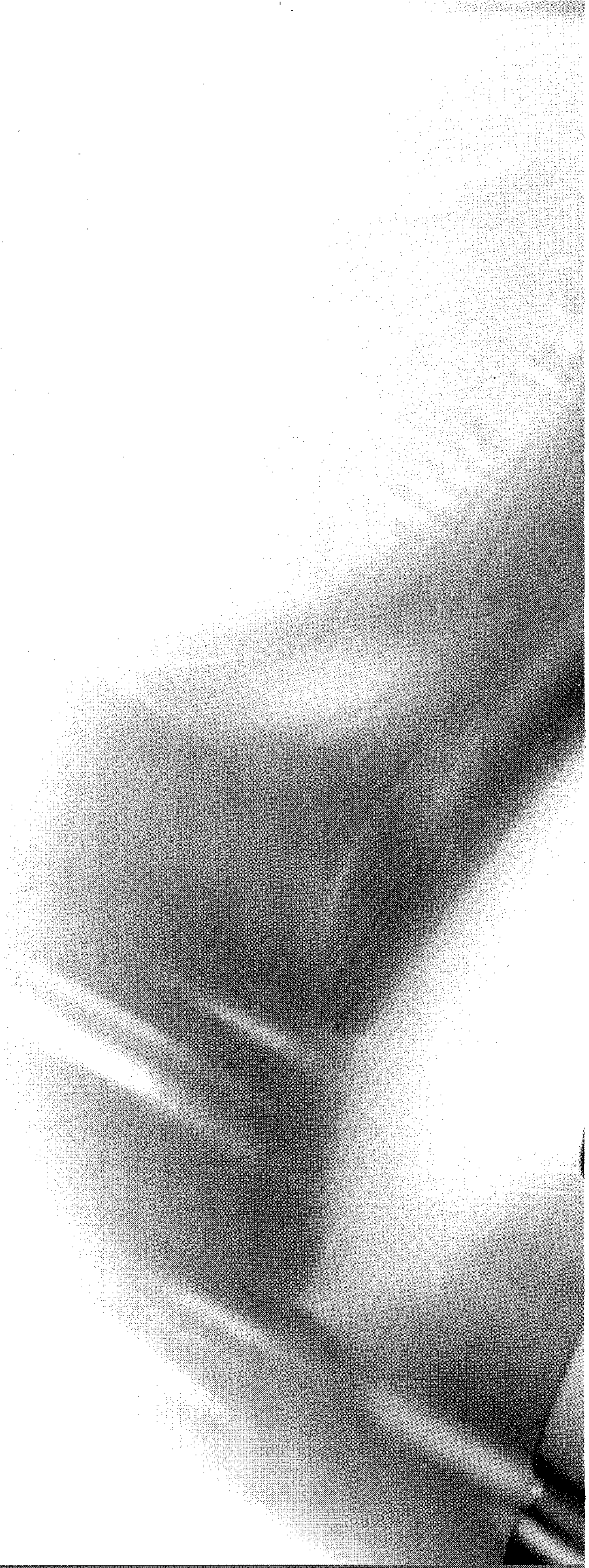

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"Clown," from 1958, by Weegee, at the International Center of Photography.

hundred-year dynasty that was founded in Iran by a grandson of Genghis. Ceremonial and decorative objects and lots of illustrated manuscripts—not to mention dauntingly profuse curatorial wall texts—document a cosmopolitan milieu in which Islamic styles got infused with Chinese ideas. Educational. Through Feb. 16. ♦ When Winston Churchill said, "Let us brace ourselves to our duties," he may not have meant "Let us tighten the corset in our pink organza gown." But in the years leading up to the Second World War, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor were doing just that, leading a life of extravagant frivolity across the English Channel in Paris. **"Blithe Spirit: The Windsor Set"** presents French couture, including fashions by Lanvin, Chanel, and Schiaparelli, created for British café society between 1935 and 1940. Most of the clothes are nothing more than beautifully tailored evening wear, but certain designers manage to slip a little subversiveness into their creations, as in the Mainbocher dress that portends impending chaos through layers of faded and shredded tulle and lace. Through Feb. 9. ♦ **"French Nineteenth-Century Drawings in the Robert Lehman Collection"** is a refreshing show whose sensibility tends to the lite: chic Ingres portraits, droll Daumiers, dreamy Barbizon landscapes, Constantin Guys, Degas dancers, minor Neo-Impressionists, Suzanne Valadons. In this company, the greatness of Seurat's "Model Facing Front" stuns. Milder surprises include a group of watercolors by Renoir that make one wish the artist had done more in that medium, which favors his genius as oils often don't. Through Feb. 9. ♦ **"The Prints of Vija Celmins."** Through Dec. 29. ♦ **"Richard Avedon: Portraits."** Through Jan. 5. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MOMA QNS)
33rd St. at Queens Blvd., Long Island City (708-9480)—**"Drawing Now: Eight Propositions,"** a trailblazing show curated by Laura Hoptman, sets the MOMA seal of approval on twenty-six youngish international artists working in the medium that's been the bedrock of visual art since Lascaux. Hoptman's "propositions" identify current modes of drawing, including illustration, decoration, fashion, architectural and scientific drafting, and comics. The show suggests a forge of styles, in which artists hammer out new links between craft, discipline, and worldly import. Some—John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, Neo Rauch, Ugo Rondinone—are farther along than others, but nearly all convey the exhilaration of being onto something. For the first time in quite a while at a museum group show, exacting comparison, argument, and judgment seem to be a matter of course. Don't miss this. Through Jan. 6. ♦ **"The Changing of the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawings from the Howard Gilman Collection."** Through Jan. 6. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 10 to 5, and Friday evenings until 7:45.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (423-3500)—In one projection in **"Going Forth by Day,"** Bill Viola's visually striking five-channel video piece commissioned by a German bank for the Guggenheim Berlin, an eclectic procession traipses through a light-dappled forest (the panoramic image evokes old-fashioned CinemaScope). In an adjacent scene, water gushes from the windows and doors of a pristine building façade. Death and resurrection figure elsewhere in the action, as Viola tackles Big Themes. Through Jan. 12. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 9 to 6; Fridays and Saturdays, 9 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—Although Gee's Bend, Alabama, is isolated by poverty and a sharp curve in the Alabama River, the group of hamlets there has for generations fostered quilt-making as a virtuoso performance in frugality. Sixty-nine hand-sewn quilts, dating from the thirties to the present and incorporating a wild variety of geometries, colors, and fabrics, are on view. Though the women of the African-American community—many of them members of the local Pettway clan—quilt and sing together (a documentary film showing continuously in the gallery broadcasts the sewing circles' amazing harmonies), no two quilts are alike. Each woman has a fiercely individual approach. The visual compositions are electric with abstraction of the most visceral sort, aesthetically inventive and born of necessity. Through March 2. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6; Fridays, 1 to 9.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM AT PHILIP MORRIS
120 Park Ave., at 42nd St. (878-2550)—Haluk Akakçe is a young Turkish-born, New York-based artist who intertwines technology and nature in poetic visions of a cyberorganic Eden. At this outpost of the uptown museum, he shows a digitally animated video that infuses his own imagery with the nostalgic aura of black-and-white movies, using cinematic fadeouts to separate scenes. In one vignette, mechanical flowers—a hybrid of magnolias and light fixtures—float through the atmosphere, and the decorative imagery brings to mind spacecraft versions of Art Nouveau or Japanese screens. In another scene, vertical bars and biomorphic blips resemble vines and buds. Through Jan. 10. (Open weekdays, 11 to 6, and Thursday evenings until 7:30.)

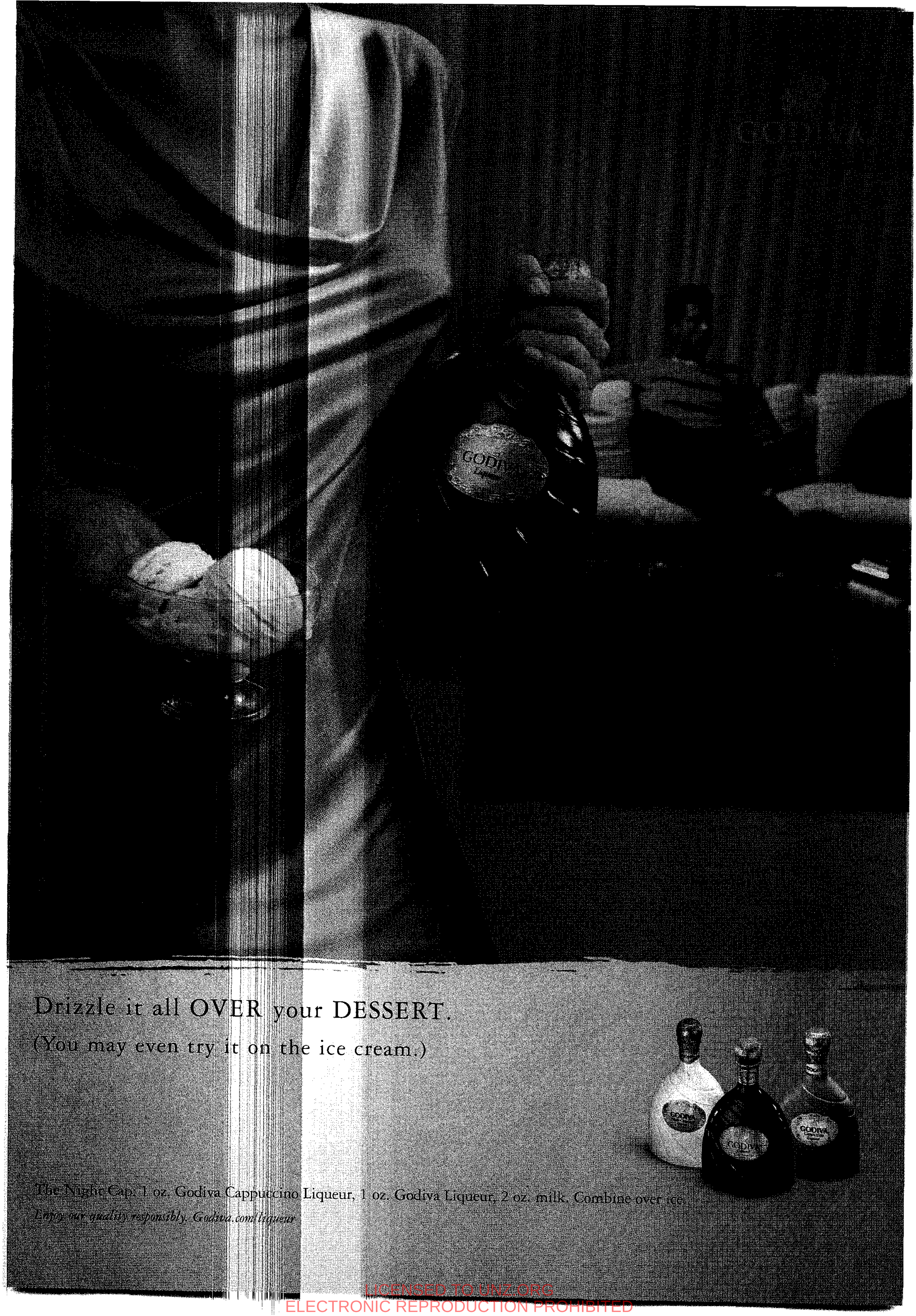
BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART
Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Exposed: The Victorian Nude,"** from Tate Britain, is a strong historical show about an era when jumpiness about sex had bizarre effects in art. Literary and classical themes provided the alibis for displaying naked females. Popular guises included Shakespearean fairies, virtuous heroines (Lady Godiva rides again, and again), Roman decadents, and the like. For male nakedness, the excuse was propaganda for robust healthiness. Lust lurked, and smut reigned. A turn toward frankness around the turn of the century—in the gloomy nudes of Walter Sickert and the too little known William Orpen—offers a fresh invention: actual people. Orpen's felicitously titled "The English Nude" (1900), a Rembrandtesque tour de force, presents a regular, interesting woman on a rumpled bed. Its mystery is that of a really lived life. Through Jan. 5. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

JEWISH MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (423-3200)—The museum is transformed into a menorah of sorts in **"Light x Eight: The Hanukkah Project 2002,"** a show of eight light-based art works installed throughout its four floors. Patterns and sequences prevail, from Leo Villareal's grid of red bulbs that blink on and off based on a mathematical equation to Philippe Parreno's Morse-code translation of a French novel, visible as flashes of color in the windows of an adjacent building. Both works suggest digital programming, a theme that carries through in Tatsuo Miyajima's computer-generated animation of floating numbers and a projected film of naked men by Xavier Veilhan that looks pixellated thanks to the grid of heat-generating light bulbs that serves as its screen. Through Feb. 2. (Open Sundays 10 to 5:45, Mondays through Wednesdays, 11 to 5:45, Thursdays, 11 to 8, and Fridays, 11 to 3.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

ADELE ALSOP
If Alsop's landscapes were exhibited on Twenty-second Street, they would register as parody: sunny flower beds, twilit pines, reflective vistas with titles like "Golden Pond." Even viewers with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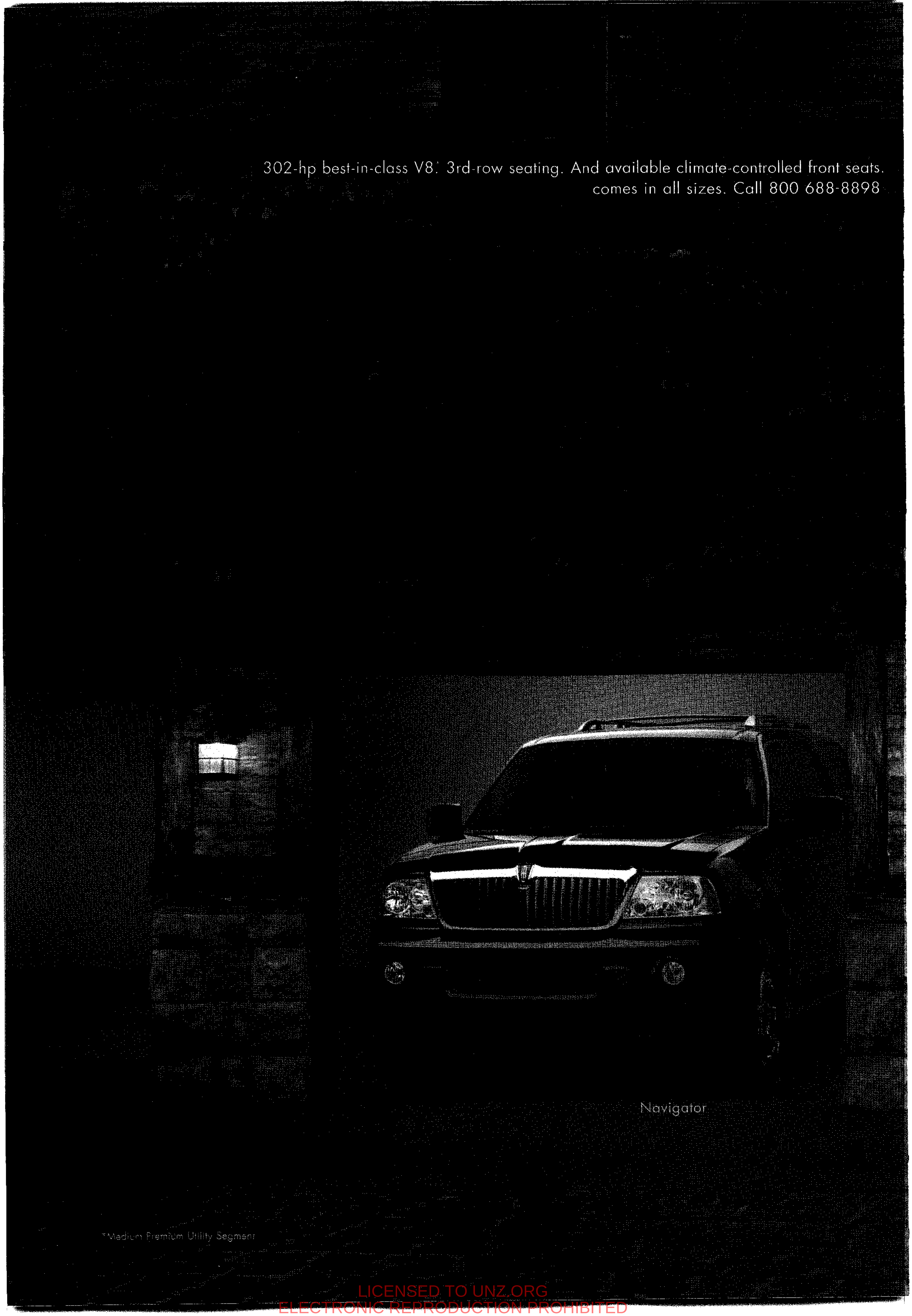
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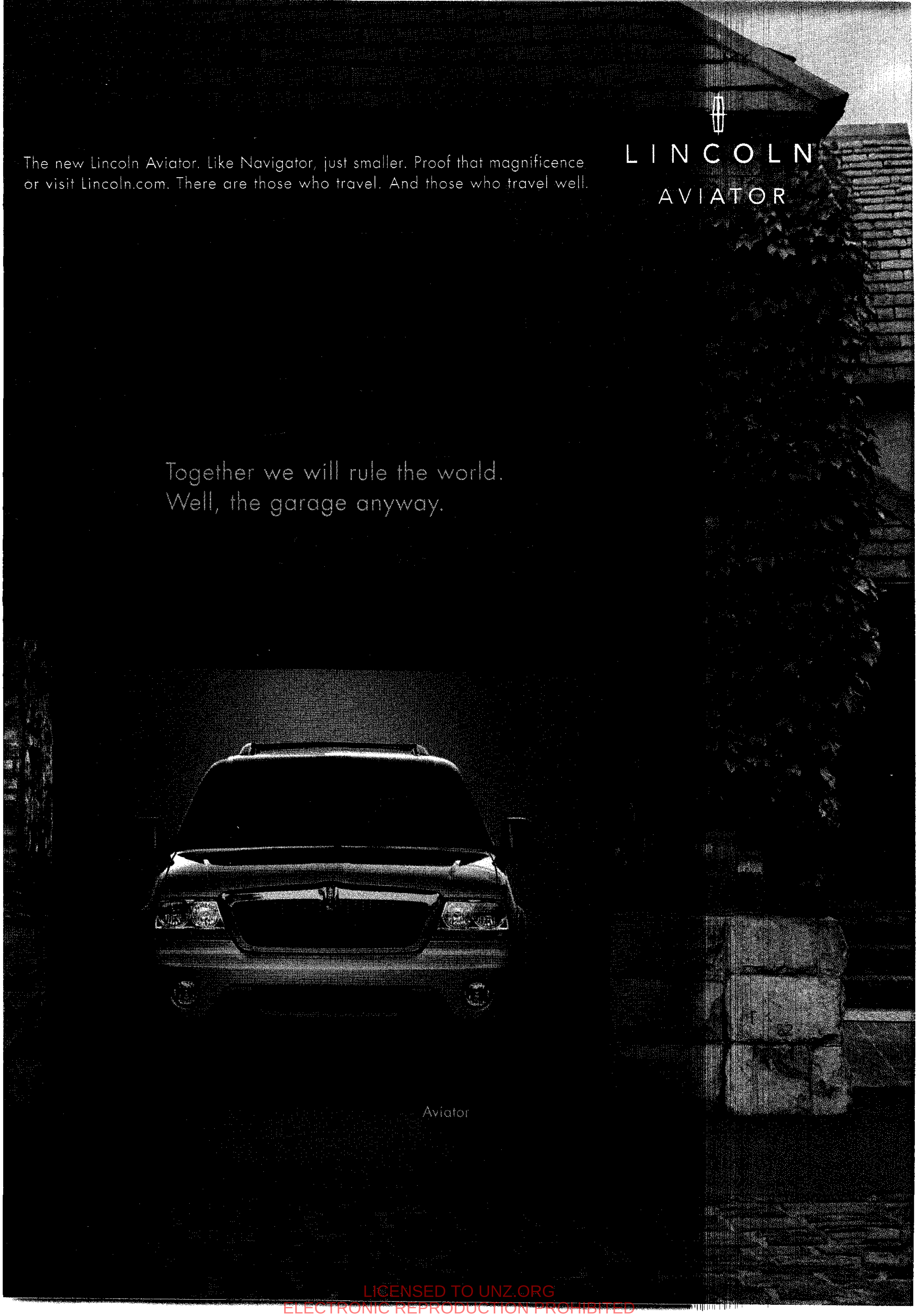

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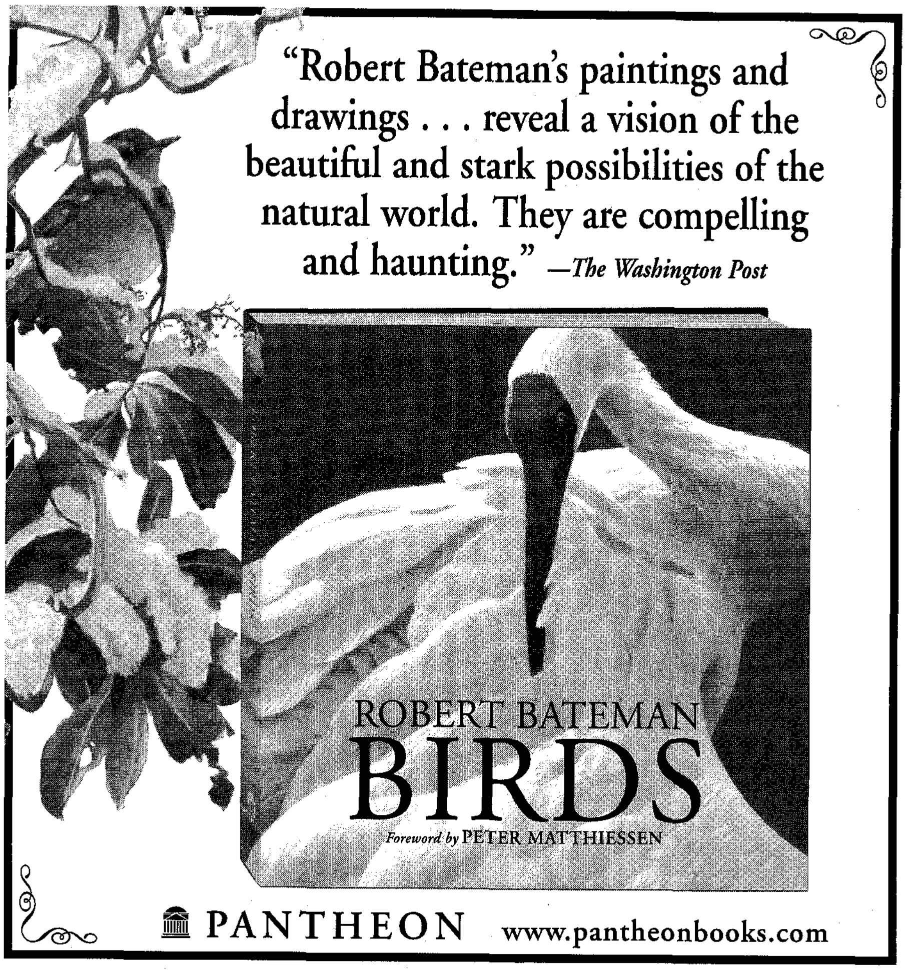
"Robert Bateman's paintings and drawings . . . reveal a vision of the beautiful and stark possibilities of the natural world. They are compelling and haunting." —*The Washington Post*

ROBERT BATEMAN
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respectably transgressive tastes, however, may find themselves caught up in Alsop's old-fashioned razzle-dazzle. Her brush wriggles and skids, delivering light, air, and a sense of giddy vehemence. Plein-air painting may be a dinosaur, but it looks pretty lively here. Through Dec. 21. (Alexandre, 41 E. 57th St. 755-2828.)

JANET FISH
This career overview begins on a high note, with Pop-realist still-lifes of shrink-wrapped produce from the late sixties with a taut, wry reflectivity. Since then, Fish has gone on to paint glowing arrays of glassware—becoming, for a time, a canvas cousin to Dale Chihuly. The most recent work includes gaudy outdoor tableaux that veer toward kitsch, along with some beautiful, unexpectedly restrained still-lifes of leaves, acorns, and earthenware. For a painter who loves color the way Fish does—indulgently, in great gulps—the lean palette must be a kind of infuriating challenge. Through Dec. 21. (DC Moore, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 247-2111.)

Short List

JOSÉ DAMASCENO
The Project, 427 W. 126th St. 662-8610.
Through Dec. 22.

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE
Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 977-7160.
Through Jan. 4.

CY TWOMBLY
Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 517-8677.
Through Jan. 4.

GALLERIES-CHELSEA

MARINA ABRAMOVIC
The vatic sculptor and performance artist from Yugoslavia has ended her residence—twelve round-the-clock, foodless, speechless days of sitting, standing, showering, sleeping, going to the toilet, and staring at viewers, who could stare back better through a telescope provided by the artist—in the wall-mounted three-room apartment that is this show's centerpiece. The elegant structure is haunted by her absence. Abramovic's hippie-ish philosophy may reduce to fortune-cookie sentiments about "energy fields" and "purity," but there is no gainsaying her theatrical chops. Through Dec. 21. (Sean Kelly, 528 W. 29th St. 239-1181.)

CHUCK CLOSE
Strong new paintings and astounding daguerreotypes, all portraying family, friends, and art worldlings. Close has enlarged the quilted mini-abstractions of his optical grid; these paintings might resolve into realism if viewed from a quarter-mile away. One intuits a likeness while seeing just paint and marvelling at Close's higher mathematics of color. (A shadow by a mouth entails, in one square, cannily rationed green, blue, purple, brown, and orange.) The daguerreotypes—unique images in mercury emulsion on metal, shot with ferociously intense strobe flash—are photography as you've never seen it. With incredibly detailed textures in silvery depth, they serve up the sitters, body and soul. Through Jan. 11. (Pace Wildenstein, 534 W. 25th St. 421-3292.)

ALBERT CONTRERAS / ALEXI WORTH
Two excerpts from the press release: "wan romantic with loud tie" and "worked for twenty-five years for the sanitation department." It's not clear, immediately, which phrase describes what. The haggard hero of "Gerberman at Large," by Alexi Worth (a contributor to this section), could believably pilot a garbage truck, and the candy-box colors of Albert Contreras's abstractions might translate into gleefully obstreperous neckwear. But Worth's precisely rendered, comically disproportionate Gerberman—seen alone in an elevator with a sad-sack bunch of his namesake daisies or sticking out in pathetically hip sneakers amid a group of non-admiring females at an art opening—is a fictional character, while Contreras, after a successful art career in the sixties, really did drop out of painting to do municipal service in

L.A. He's back now, with an eye-popping vengeance, and nicely paired here with Worth's downmarket comic hero, a sort of Jacques Tati with a plastic wineglass. Through Dec. 21. (Maynes, 529 W. 20th St. 741-3318.)

INKA ESSENHIGH
Gone is the old, high-gloss Essenhigh lustre. The artist's much discussed change in medium (from enamel to oil) has made her new paintings less shiny and less hermetic. Set against threadbare backgrounds, the newly legible subjects occasionally verge on one-liners: a female pasha lounges, served by hunks; a fat girl boogies alone in her room; a drowning couple enjoys a seaweedy smooch. Essenhigh's misses are now more obvious, but so are her hits, above all, "Green Wave," a stunning beachscape of dark, rearing, unsurfable breakers. Through Dec. 20. (303 Gallery, 525 W. 22nd St. 255-1121.)

FORCEFIELD
The least pretentious space in Chelsea is Daniel Reich's tiny studio apartment, which doubles as a gallery four days a week. It's an apt setting for work by this team of musician-craftsmen, who were plucked from obscurity at the last Whitney Biennial and are invariably described as kooky. Reich offers a sampling of their music, videos, posters, and zigzag body stockings. The ensemble has a diffuse, diffident charm; if you're hungry for work that feels authentically twenty-something, look no further. Through Dec. 21. (Reich, 308 W. 21st St. 917-408-9097.)

YAYOI KUSAMA
The Princess of Polka Dots, resurgent since her 1998 MOMA retrospective, has left the Japanese mental hospital where she boards and arrived on these shores with five installations. Four are lacklustre. The fifth, though, is magic. Step across the threshold of a mirrored room called "Fireflies on the Water," close the door, and you're in a serene private limbo. Tiny multicolored flickerings recede in all directions. The cosmos, it turns out, is an infinite dressing room. "I am standing at the zenith of my brilliance," Kusama declared recently; visitors to this show will be tempted to demur, then agree. Through Jan. 25. (Robert Miller, 524 W. 26th St. 366-4774.)

ERWIN REDL
At the past Whitney Biennial, a curtain of red L.E.D. lights veiled the museum's façade, as if a public-service announcement had given up its day job for more flamboyant pursuits. The new life for L.E.D.s came courtesy of Erwin Redl, whose current show includes two more illuminated installations: a bank of red lights filling an awkward architectural niche, to mediocre effect, and a room of green lights that quite sensationally turn the darkened interior into a 3-D grid of firefly-like nodes. Redl's works on paper are equally attractive, translating the glow and spangle of his light displays into delicate weavings in copper wire and starbursts of silver solder splashed on large white sheets. Through Jan. 7. (Riva, 529 W. 20th St. 242-3434.)

Short List

KARIN DAVIE
Mary Boone, 541 W. 24th St. 752-2929.
Through Dec. 21.

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN
Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 206-9300.
Through Dec. 21.

TOM SACHS
Bohen Foundation, 415 W. 13th St. 414-4575.
Through spring.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

JUTTA KOETHER AND STEVEN PARRINO
Two painters who share an anarchic bent and a taste for punk rock collaborate on a show that harks back to the early days of Dada and Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire. By night the show serves as a backdrop for performances by bands with names like Electrophilia and Black Dice. By day the show reveals art work more complex than the artists' definition—

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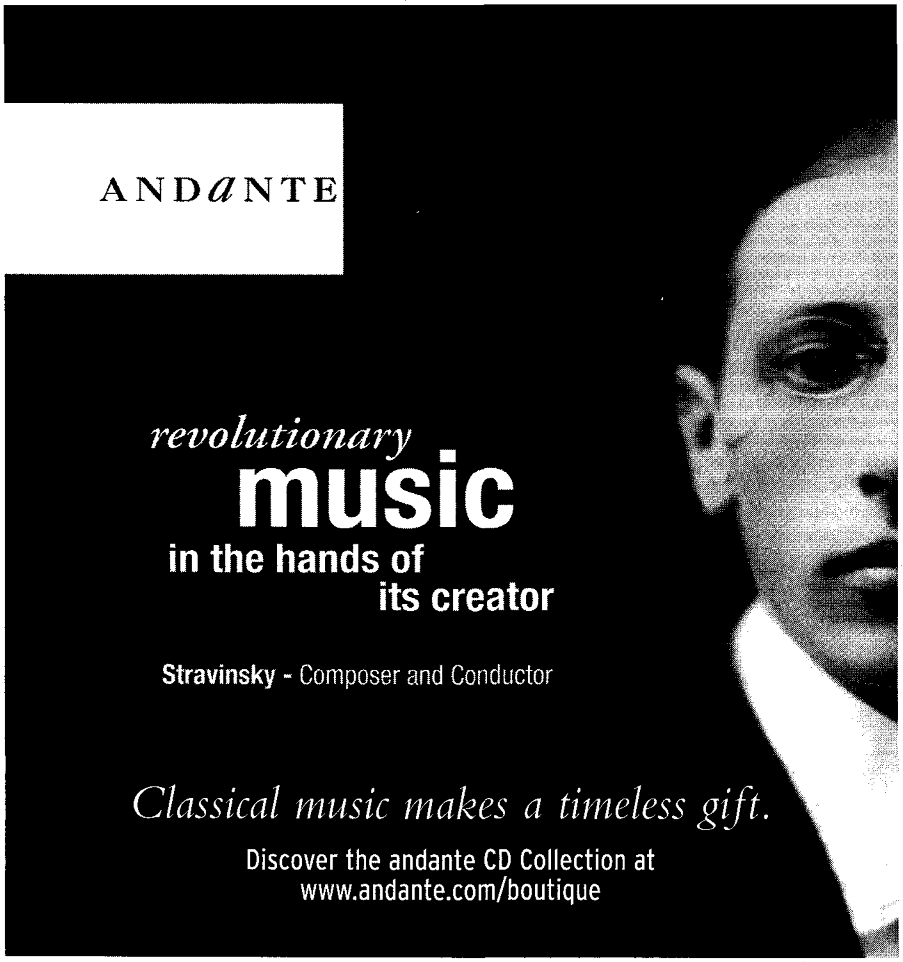
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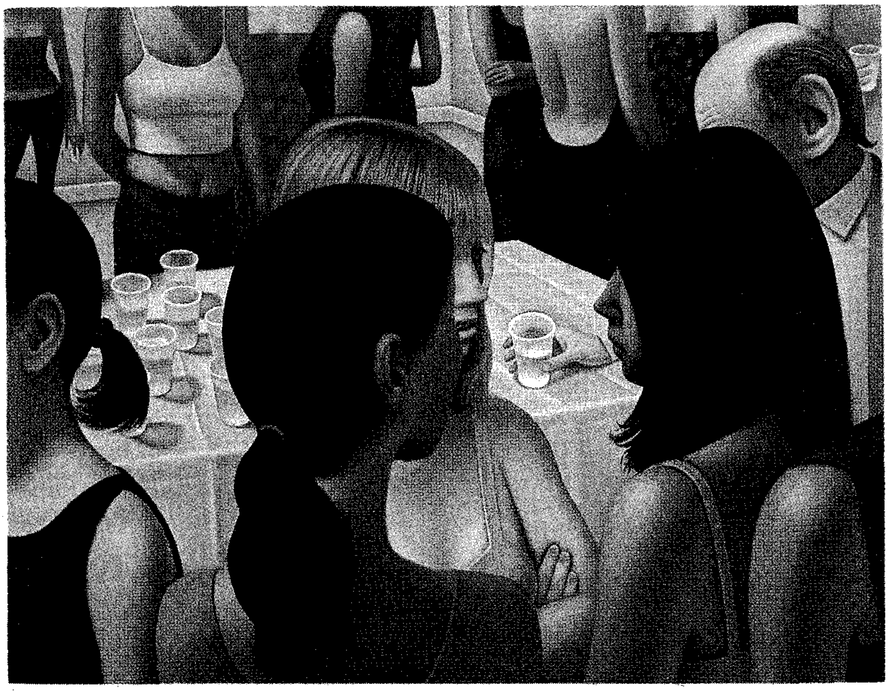
failed paintings—would suggest. Koether's unstretched canvases, miasmic clouds graced by tiny lines of text and bits of black and white thread, have a mystical appeal. Across the way Parrino's paint-laden canvases slump off their support like hardcore partyers the morning after. Through Jan. 4. (Swiss Institute, 495 Broadway. 925-2035.)

VIRGIL MARTI
For the inaugural show of this alternative exhibition space on the Lower East Side, the artist has lined the walls with sheets of Mylar that he has silk-screened in a decorative pattern of macramé and flowers. A row of chandeliers made of pink-resin antlers (they look like Venetian glass) completes the installation. Fred Tomaselli's ecstatic ornamentation springs to mind, especially when you learn that the rope patterns are based on webs spun by spiders on psychedelic drugs. But the Pop-inflected opulence also suggests a craft-happy Warhol revamping the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Through Dec. 22. (Participant, 95 Rivington St. 917-488-0185.)

Short List

DAVID HAMMONS
Ace, 275 Hudson St. 255-5599. Through Feb. 1.

LISA RUYTER
Koenig, 249 Centre St. 334-9255. Through Jan. 4.



"Tangent," from Alexi Worth's "Gerberman at Large" series (that's Gerberman with the male-pattern baldness and his hand on the wine), at Maynes.

PHOTOGRAPHY

F. & D. CARTIER
Given the images' dominant color (pink), their subject (Barbie-doll dresses and finely woven handkerchiefs), and the title ("Boys and Girls") of this husband-and-wife team's first American solo show, you could be forgiven for expecting either a cloying kitsch extravaganza or predictable gender theorizing. But the photograms on display here are both refreshingly irony-free and surprisingly organic. In the "Someday" series, which features the white exoskeletons of doll clothes against rich pink backgrounds, the dresses take on the gauzy etherealness of thistledown, or seedpods; in "Maria," a skinny ball gown all but slithers to life, like some shimmery animal. And then there are the pinks themselves, which range from the pale red of lips to the deep orange of fresh fish flesh. One thinks, oddly, of both meat and flowers—not wholly inappropriate, in the end, for a show that's at once decorative and unexpectedly nourishing. Through Jan. 11. (Milo, 552 W. 24th St. 414-0370.)

SARAH CHARLESWORTH
In this series, called "Neverland," Charlesworth photographs objects freighted with a literate but banal psychological significance—a pipe, a candle, a stack of teetering teacups—and presents them as distinct floating symbols. They could figure in a dream that you might talk about with your analyst: "So then, Doctor, I saw the dark ship float by the Devil's face. What does it mean?" Shot against like-colored backgrounds, the desks, fruit, and globes emerge from the picture frame subtly, and coolly ask if dreams can be photographed. Through Dec. 21. (Gorney Bravin & Lee, 534 W. 26th St. 352-8372.)

DAN ESTABROOK
Although he uses two of the earliest techniques for creating a photographic image on paper—calotype negatives and salt-print positives—Estabrook's work has a thoroughly contemporary appeal. By appropriating imagery, as well as processes, from the eighteen-forties, he creates a form of instantaneous nostalgia. In one unique paper negative made this year, a woman turns her back to the camera; her Laura Ingalls Wilder-style braid is added in pencil, which gives a level of detail impossible without the artful sleight of hand. The "Little Devils" series—tiny, three-quarter portraits in which pencilled-in dots buzz around the sitters' faces—conjures up the photographs of "ghosts" so popular in the nineteenth century. Through Jan. 11. (Morthland, 511 W. 25th St. 242-7767.)

SANDI FELLMAN
These highly magnified closeups of butterflies, bugs, and their glyph-like shadows merge scientific precision with pure abstraction. Packed with hints of hidden meaning, each of these sepia-toned images threatens to induce hours of metaphysical musing. When Fellman sets her sights on the humble daddy longlegs, the intricate pattern between dense, pulsing body and shimmering legs seems proof of some powerful mathematical theorem. Her dynamic butterfly profile possesses a startling, visceral glory, but its areas of obscurity and darkness remain a mystery no matter how close you might get to the frame. Through Jan. 4. (Houk, 745 Fifth Ave. 750-7070.)

NICK HOOKER
The mythology that leaps from these images is purely personal, thus basically obscure to the viewer, but that doesn't detract from this exuberant melding of Yves Tanguy's surrealistic landscapes and Japanese *anime*. Only after an intensive study of Hooker's first New York show does it become clear that a photographic image of the Berlin Wall is embedded in these digitally manipulated, Spirograph-on-a-grid panoramas. The results are loopily beautiful and hearken back to the waterfalls and ruins of Frederick Church's epics while looking toward a future at the edge of Hooker's own reality. Through Jan. 11. (Briggs Robinson, 527 W. 29th St. 560-9075.)

MICHAEL MEADS
Somewhere between Birmingham and Anniston, Alabama, there's a place called Eastaboga, and, as represented in Meads's photographs, it is a town where teen-agers don't go to school much and where women and black people don't exist at all. In spite of this sense of irreality, both Thomas Eakins and Larry Clark might be comfortable in Eastaboga. Do people really want to pose in front of a Confederate flag? Here there might not be much else for them to do. Some boys brandish guns, and others show off their nude bodies for Meads's camera; some boys might be lovers, and others show off scars from fighting with each other. The implicit violence and male braggadocio shown in these color-saturated prints might be off-putting, but the style with which Mead portrays small-town culture is startlingly contemporary and intimate. Through Dec. 28. (Nikolai, 505 W. 22nd St. 414-8511.)

RYAN WEIDEMAN
Weideman makes his living driving a cab and, when his passengers agree to it, makes art by snapping their portraits in the back seat. The results are dense images that chronicle more than two decades of lower Manhattanites. "Self-Portrait with Woman and Cat" is a study in jolting contrast that pits big-city sophistication against urban loneliness. "Self-Portrait with Vampire and Nymphet" packs a potent dose of dark perversity, while "Six-Girl Crack-Up," a rare early picture in which Weideman doesn't appear, is an innocent burst of bottled-blond joy. The tour de force, "Self-Portrait with Salsa Betty," frames a menacingly explicit peep show behind the taxi's plastic partition, while in the foreground Weideman's sad eyes bear witness to the viewer's voyeurism. Through Jan. 5. (Bruce Silverstein, 504 W. 22nd St. 627-3930.)

NEIL WINOKUR
These monochromatic photos are so unavoidably about color that the color itself becomes almost incidental. Indeed, the glossy, large-scale prints, in which a banana, say, is photographed against a backdrop of its near-exact yellow, force the viewer to consider its other properties. In one of the show's most memorable images, an orange—how, after all, does one describe an orange without identifying its color?—seems almost to recede against its background. From across the room, though, the viewer can admire its waxy skin, stippled with a galaxy of pores, and the faint crescent of a shadow it casts. Winokur has limited his palette to bright, rich, accessible tones (purple, blue, yellow, pink) and chosen as objects the familiar (an eggplant, a balloon) and the iconic (a flower). The reductiveness and the unexpected obviousness of the pairings are both witty and, somehow, relaxing; once outside the gallery, the world's buzz of complicated colors seems impossibly nuanced and slightly disorienting. Through Dec. 31. (Borden, 560 Broadway. 431-0166.)

TOM WOOD
In the early nineteen-eighties, Wood, with an ethnographer's eye, snapped the denizens of the Chelsea Reach, the first discothèque in Northern England, as they primped, fought with the doorman, drank, danced, and made out in a bleary-eyed reverie. The fashions alone (satin jumpsuit anyone?) are cringe-worthy, but the emotional depth Wood was able to capture in each frame is a marvel. The work mixes the aesthetic of Nan Goldin (with cleaner hair) and the studious monomania of the Bechers. Note the three cou-

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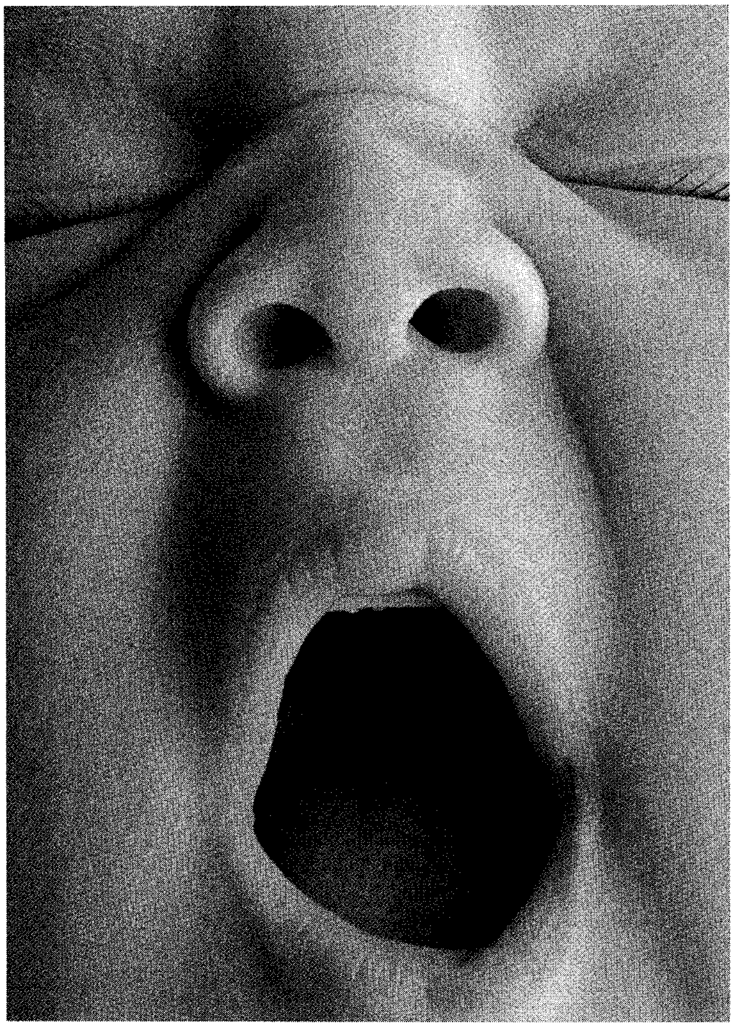

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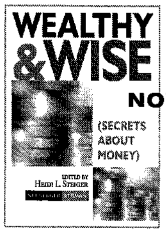

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NIAGARA FALLS ALL OVER AGAIN

by ELIZABETH McCRACKEN

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ples on the dance floor (one laughing, another chastely kissing, and the third all hands and tongues), a group anxiously waiting for the rest room, or the woman pinking her lips under flashing red lights, and remember that it was fun at the time. Through Dec. 21. (Erben, 516 W. 20th St. 645-8701.)

"THE DEPTHOGRAPHY SHOW"
You could spend a good deal of time rocking back and forth in front of M. Henry Jones, Robert Munn, and Sara Cook's Technicolor, trip-hoppy 3-D photos, watching the image morph from one thing (a cartoon blond bimbette with antennae) to another (a bug-eyed alien!). The show's more self-consciously serious work—a Coney Island roller coaster with its cascading car, an old man on a stoop politely raising his hat—seem somewhat obligatory, as if the artists were determined to display the technical accomplishment of their technique, known as lenticular imaging. Far more entertaining are the "Pee-wee's Playhouse"-esque tableaux of the show's fantasy pictures: in one, a multi-eyeballed house in a thicket of painted wooden trees lolls its tongue out soggily when you step to the right; in another, a sad-eyed Yorkshire terrier wearing ridiculous overalls stands guard in front of a cheerful yet menacing farmhouse. One has to admire the artists' restraint—how easy would it have been to apply their technique to pornographic images? Not that they would need to—their crackerjack weirdness is capable of holding its own. Through Jan. 1. (The Proposition, 559 W. 22nd St. 242-0035.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
1133 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. 857-0000— **"Weegee's Trick Photography."** Arthur Fellig gained notoriety and a cool nickname—think Ouija board—in the nineteen-thirties for his uncanny ability to beat everyone to the scenes of grisly murders or deadly car accidents. This work defines the idea of a rough-around-the-edges New York City now long gone. For the last twenty years of his life, though, Weegee abandoned crime-scene photography in order to noodle around in his darkroom making "distortions," "caricatures," or, as he liked to call it, "art." The nearly two hundred vintage prints—clowns jumping from the frame, Marilyn Monroe stretched like Silly Putty, a creepy mirrored image of lacquered fingernails—show a true subversive wit mixed with an astounding sense of what it takes to entertain. Through Feb. 16. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10-5; Fridays, 10-8; Saturdays and Sundays, 10-6.)

Short List

GABRIEL OROZCO
Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 977-7160.
Through Jan. 4.

MICHAEL SPANO
Laurence Miller, 20 W. 57th St. 397-3930.
Through Dec. 21.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

CHRISTIE'S
Dec. 18 at 10 A.M.: Carpets from around the world. A Mohtasham Kashan carpet from Central Persia, circa 1880 (estimated to bring up to a hundred and eighty thousand dollars), is a highlight of the sale. ♦ Dec. 18 at 2: Botanical books from the collection of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. ♦ Dec. 19 at 10 A.M. and 2: Books and manuscripts. ♦ Dec. 20 at 10 A.M. and 2: A broad selection of Hollywood memorabilia and movie posters, including thirty lots from the collection of the publicist Bobby Zarem. Marilyn Monroe's personal script for the film "Some Like It Hot," the Triumph Stag Roadster used in the James Bond movie "Diamonds Are Forever," and the only known copy of the three-sheet poster promoting the Marx Brothers' "Animal Crackers" (estimated to bring up to twenty-five thousand dollars) are among the highlights of the sale. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 636-2000.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
The final performances this season of **"Elektra,"** with Gabriele Schnaut, Deborah Voigt, Hanna Schwarz, Siegfried Jerusalem, and René Pape; James Levine conducts. (Dec. 18 at 8 and Dec. 21 at 2.) ♦ Strauss's **"Die Fledermaus"** arrives for the holidays, with a cast that includes Solveig Kringelborn, Rosemary Joshua (making her début), Jennifer Larmore, David Kuebler, Paul Charles Clarke, and Peter Coleman-Wright (another début); Philippe Jordan conducts his first performances at the house. The final performance of the year is the legendary New Year's Gala, with a long list of special guests dropping by for the party scene, where they compete with the magnificent revolving set. (Dec. 19, Dec. 23, and Dec. 28 at 8 and Dec. 31 at 7.) ♦ **"Dialogues des Carmélites,"** Francis Poulenc's tragedy about an order of nuns destined for the guillotine during the French Revolution, is one of the strangest operas of the last century—a work of unflinching seriousness that addresses the most central issues of life and faith by way of an over-the-top romantic score. John Dexter's elegant yet unsentimental production, which introduced the work to the house in 1977, returns with a cast that includes Patricia Racette, Christine Goerke, Heidi Grant Murphy, Stephanie Blythe, Felicity Palmer, Matthew Polenzani, and James Courtney; James Conlon. (Dec. 20 at 8 and Dec. 30 at 7:30.) ♦ With Emily Pulley, Robin Blitch Wiper, Elizabeth Bishop, and Adam Klein replacing Racette, Murphy, Blythe, and Polenzani. (Dec. 26 at 8.) ♦ You can't help but be a little disappointed when the most memorable moment in William Bolcom's opera **"A View from the Bridge"**—which has a libretto, based on Arthur Miller's play, by Miller and Arnold Weinstein—turns out to be an Italianized version of the 1915 standard "Paper Doll." Bolcom, whose plaintive melodic gift courses through his songs and orchestral works, seems afraid of conjuring up the real thing here (a flimsy little tenor number called "New York Lights" doesn't cut it). Yet he has created an intricate and appealing sound world (laced with Weill, Puccini, and Harry Warren) in which Miller's nineteen-fifties Red Hook Italians can plausibly live and breathe. Catherine Malfitano, Isabel Bayrakdarian, Gregory Turay, and Kim Josephson (as Eddie Carbone), confidently reprising their roles from the original production at Lyric Opera of Chicago, have Miller's and Bolcom's rhythms in their bones, and Frank Galati's direction is elastic and assured; Santo Loquasto's set, gloomily lit by Duane Schuler, is a German Expressionist version of Archie Bunker's living room. Dennis Russell Davies, putting in an unusually passionate performance, conducts. (Dec. 21 at 8, Dec. 24 at 7:30, and Dec. 28 at 1:30. These are the final performances.) ♦ The season première of the Zeffirelli production of **"Don Giovanni,"** with Barbara Frittoli, Carol Vaness, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Michael Schade, Denis Sedov, and Eric Halfvarson; Sylvain Cambreling. (Dec. 27 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000.)

AMATO OPERA
The feisty little East Village company ends the year with a run of Rossini's **"Barber of Seville."** (Amato Opera Theatre, 319 Bowery, at 2nd St. 228-8200. Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 7:30, Dec. 22 and Dec. 29 at 2:30, and Dec. 31 at 7.)

HOLIDAY MUSIC

HANDEL'S "MESSIAH"
For the first time in more than twenty years, the New York Philharmonic (with the Westminster Symphonic Choir) will add its sounds to the city's annual cluster of Handelian performances. And they're not doing it on the cheap: Elizabeth Futral, Anna Larsson, David Daniels, Richard Croft, and Nathan Berg are the vocal soloists, with Neville Marriner, a conductor of ambassadorial good taste,

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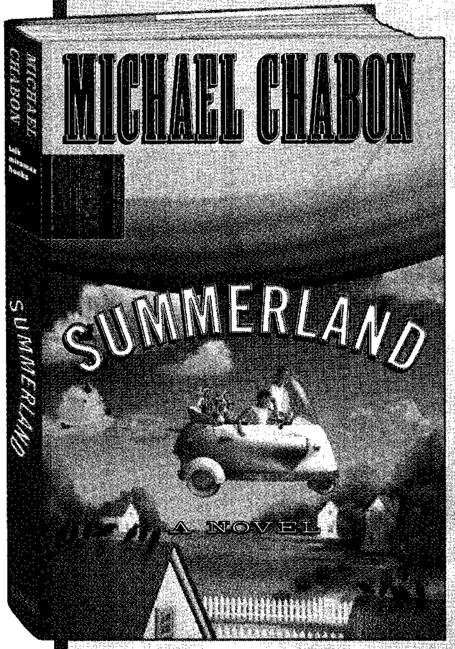

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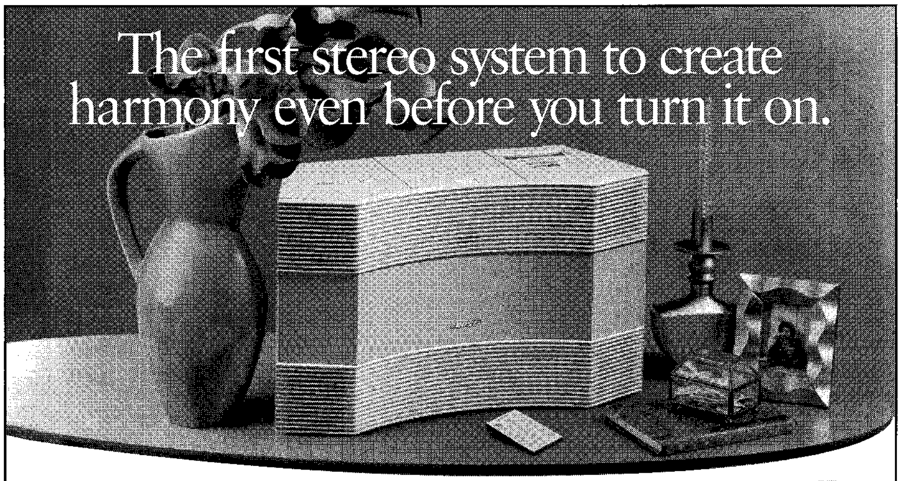
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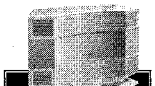

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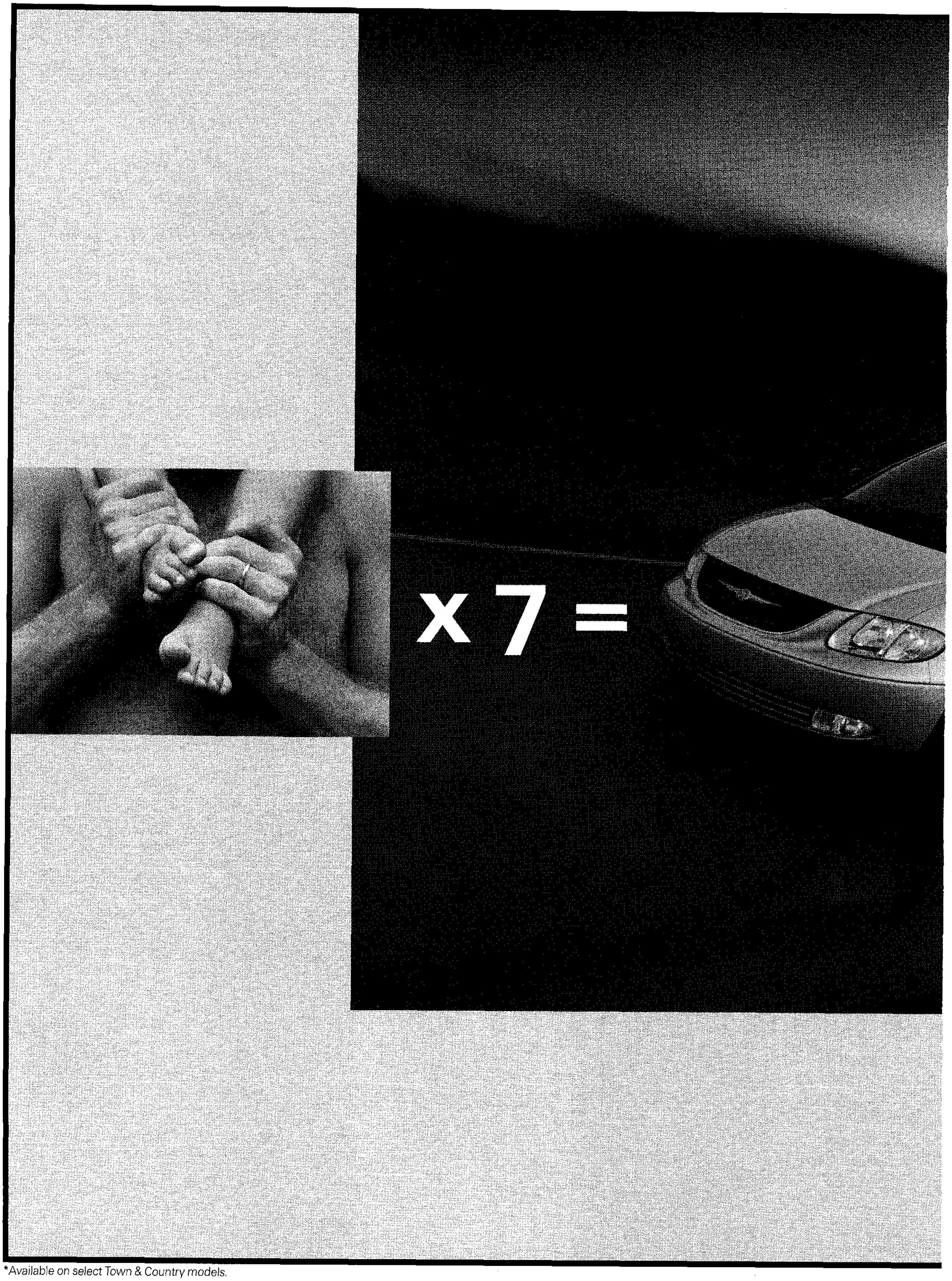

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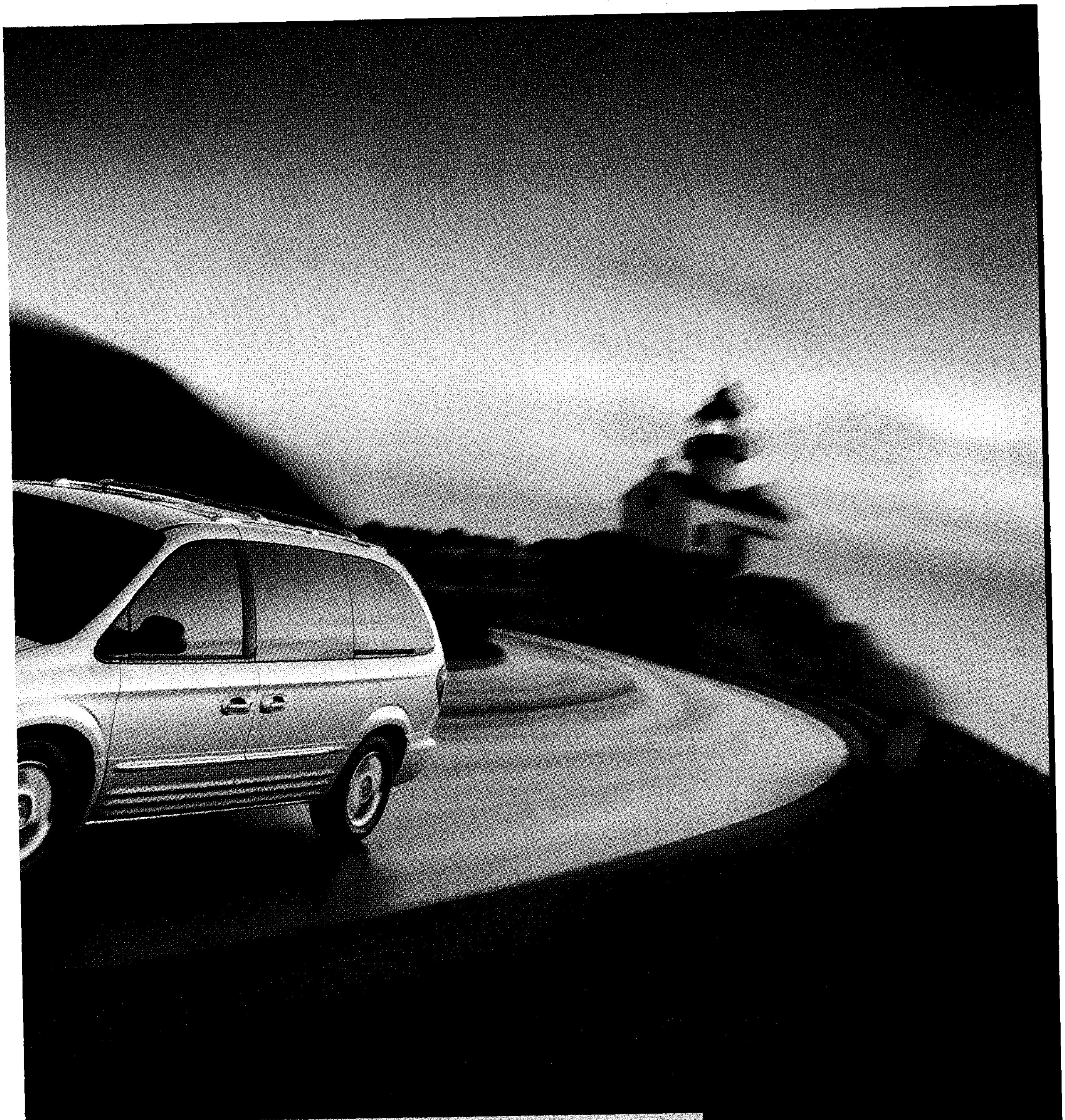

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on the podium. (Riverside Church, Riverside Dr. at 120th St. 875-5656. Dec. 18-19 at 7:30 and Dec. 20-21 at 8.) ♦ Richard Westenburg, whose choral group Musica Sacra offers one of the area's best performances, conducts the work at Carnegie Hall. (247-7800. Dec. 18 at 8.) ♦ The National Choral Council's thirty-fifth annual "Messiah Sing-In" lets the audience, up to three thousand strong, be the chorus; bring a score, or buy one at the door. (Avery Fisher Hall. 333-5333. Dec. 18 at 8.) ♦ St. Thomas Church, with its celebrated choir of men and boys, offers its final performance of the work this year, in topnotch period style, with the early-music group Concert Royal and soloists. (Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. 664-9360. Dec. 19 at 7:30.) ♦ Those wishing a quieter, more meditative experience should consider returning to St. Thomas for the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, a service of short Bible readings alternating with music in the best Anglican tradition. (Dec. 22 at 11 A.M. and 4.) ♦ Oratorio Society of New York—the city's oldest choral ensemble, established by Andrew Carnegie—performs its hundred-and-twenty-eighth "Messiah," at Carnegie Hall. Lyndon Woodside conducts the group, with members of the Westchester Philharmonic assisting. (247-7800. Dec. 19 at 8.)

CHRISTMAS AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Dec. 18: The American Boychoir sings a program of folk songs, Renaissance carols, and other holiday favorites. ♦ Dec. 19: An accessible evening program of Purcell, Boccherini, Bach (the "Air" from the Third Orchestral Suite), and Mozart, from the exuberant young string ensemble Concertante. ♦ Dec. 22: Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church Sanctuary Choir, renowned for its renditions of gospel music and spirituals, closes the Met's December concerts with a variety of holiday music. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 570-3949. All performances take place in the Medieval Sculpture Hall at 6:30 and 8:30.)

WESTERN WIND VOCAL ENSEMBLE
In "Holiday Light," the diminutive a-cappella group sings medieval carols, Renaissance polyphony, American and Latin-American sacred songs, and other holiday music. (Grace Church, Broadway at 10th St. 873-2848. Dec. 20 at 8.)

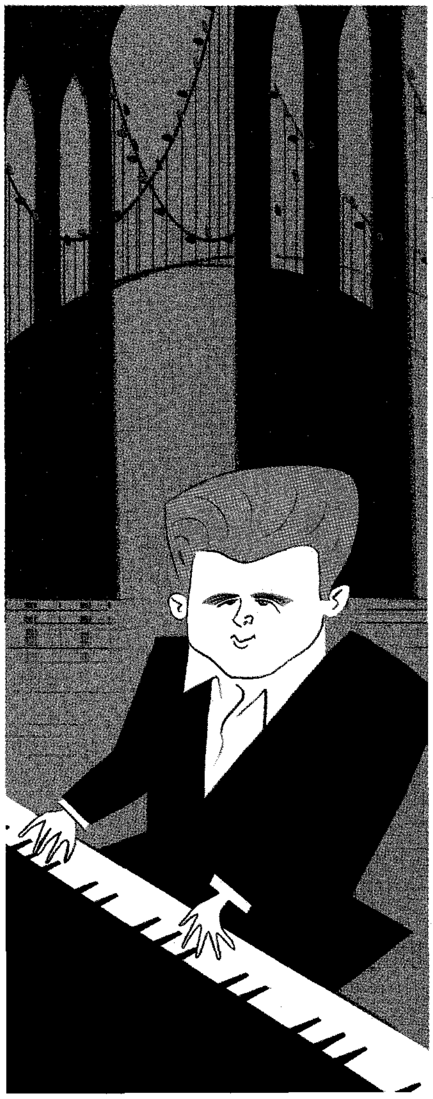
VOICES OF ASCENSION
Marvis Martin is the soprano soloist for a program with the respected choral ensemble and the organist Kenneth Dake, featuring music by Josquin, Victoria, Rachmaninoff, and Duruflé, motets by contemporary New York composers, and a selection of Christmas carols sung in the classic David Willcocks arrangements. Dennis Keene conducts. (Church of the Ascension, Fifth Ave. at 10th St. 358-1469. Dec. 21 at 8.)

POMERIUM
In the last of the Cloisters' Christmas concerts, the early-music chorus performs an a-cappella program of Gregorian chant, devotional songs, and Renaissance polyphony. (Fort Tryon Park. 650-2290. Dec. 22 at 1 and 3.)

NEW YORK'S ENSEMBLE FOR EARLY MUSIC
Offering "A Baroque Christmas," a smorgasbord of French noëls, Lutheran Advent carols, Scottish folk tunes, and more. (Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. 280-0330. Dec. 22 at 3 and Dec. 25 at 3 and 8.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
With half of the Philharmonic's personnel off playing "Messiah" at Riverside Church, the players who are left will set their sights on Rodion Shchedrin's "The Enchanted Wanderer," the first extended work commissioned by the orchestra under Lorin Maazel's leadership. Shchedrin enjoys a position in Russia similar to that of William Bolcom in the United States: both are hyperproductive eclectics who have absorbed their countries' folk traditions into their styles as deeply as the most modern of compositional techniques. Shchedrin's "opera for the concert stage," based on Nikolai Leskov's mystical 1873 novella, uses the three soloists (the mezzo-soprano Lilli Paasikivi, the tenor Evgeny Akimov, and the bass Ain Anger) as storytellers as well as singers, backed by a chamber chorus and a small orchestra with a big percussion department. Maazel, a longtime admirer of the composer's music, conducts the world-première performances. (Dec. 19 at 7:30 and Dec. 20-21 at 8.) ♦ The orchestra's Principal Brass Quintet gets together with some friends, the German Brass, for a festive holiday program. (Dec. 22 at 3.) ♦ Maazel, who conducted the Cleveland Orchestra in the first complete recording of "Porgy and Bess," comes back to Gershwin's folk opera for a New Year's Eve concert performance of selected scenes; the composer's "Cuban Overture" and "An American in Paris" complete the program. The bass-baritone Willard White (as Porgy), the soprano Indra Thomas, the tenor Lawrence Brownlee, and the singers of the Ebony Ecumenical Ensemble all make their Philharmonic débuts. (Dec. 31 at 8.) (Avery Fisher Hall. 875-5656.)



Steven Beck plays the Goldberg Variations at Bargemusic on Dec. 24.

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NEW YORK STRING ORCHESTRA
Carnegie Hall's proud holiday tradition, a convocation of young virtuosos conducted by Jaime Laredo. Dec. 24 at 7: Music by Grieg, Schubert (the "Unfinished" Symphony), and Mendelssohn (the First Piano Concerto, with Lang Lang). ♦ Dec. 28 at 8: The violinist Leila Josefowicz and the Young People's Chorus of New York City join the ensemble for an all-Mendelssohn program, including the Violin Concerto and the incidental music for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (with narration by the actress Claire Bloom). (Carnegie Hall. 247-7800.)

RECITALS

BARGEMUSIC
Olga Bloom's doughty chamber-music collective ends the year with a mix of traditional and holiday-minded programs. Dec. 19-20 at 7:30: The redoubtable Mark Peskanov, on violin, leads a string trio in a concert of serenades by Dohnányi, Beethoven, and Henze. ♦ Dec. 21 at 7:30 and Dec. 22 at 4: The flutist Marieke Schneemann joins the trio (which also includes the violist Toby Hoffman and the cellist Taco Kooistra) for Mozart's complete Flute Quartets, plus a little music by Bach and Marin Marais. ♦ Dec. 24 at 7:30: Steven Beck, a composer-pianist (and protégé of Peter Serkin) rising rapidly on the New York scene, offers a Christmas Eve recital of Bach's Goldberg Variations—with plenty of time left to scoot off to Midnight Mass. ♦ Dec. 26 at 7:30: In the first of two concerts, Edward Arron and Avner Arad embark on a traversal of Beethoven's complete music for cello and piano (including the Second and Fifth Sonatas). ♦ Dec. 27-28 at 7:30: Music by Mendelssohn, Ravel, and Arensky (the lovely Piano Trio in D Minor), performed by Arron, the violinist Yehonatan Berick, and the pianist Andrew Armstrong. ♦ Dec. 29 at 4: Arron and Arad complete their Beethoven survey, offering the First, Third, and Fourth Sonatas along with the composer's variations on "Ein Mädchen" from Mozart's "Die Zauberflöte." ♦ Dec. 31 at 7: A big family of Bargemusic regulars take the stage for Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

SUNDAYS ON THE ISLAND
Le Refuge Inn, a charming French-style country inn nestled amidst the yacht slips of City Island, is the site for another of New York's long-standing chamber-music series. Receptions follow each concert. Dec. 22 at 12:30: The Russin pianist Tamara Kurdadze makes her Sundays début, joining the cellist Wolfram Koessel for a program of Strauss and Rachmaninoff. ♦ Dec. 29 at 12:30: A seasonal concert of Debussy, Telemann, and others, performed by the flutist Bart Feller, the oboist James Roe, and the pianist Shin-Chun Wu. (620 City Island Ave., the Bronx. 212-927-9194.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

PAUL WINTER'S SOLSTICE CELEBRATION
The globe-trotting New Age musician rigs up the bosun's chair (used in striking the seven-foot tam-tam gong as it rises toward the top of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine) to mark the changing of the seasons. His guests include the Zimbabwean vocalist Lucky Moyo, the American gospel singer Chris Berry, and the drummers and dancers of the Forces of Nature Dance Theatre Ensemble. Expect the excitement to be at a fever pitch on the final night, as the solstice moment is at 8:14 that evening. (Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. 662-2133. Dec. 19-20 at 7:30 and Dec. 21 at 2 and 7:30.)

KLEZ FOR KIDS!
The Eldridge Street Project presents an afternoon of klezmer music and dancing for the younger set. (12 Eldridge St. 219-0903. Dec. 25 at noon and 2:30.)

READINGS
Dec. 19 at 8: D. Nurske, the former poet laureate of Brooklyn, offers selections from his new collection, "The Fall." (Riverdale-Yonkers Society for Ethical Culture, 4450 Fieldston Rd., the Bronx. 718-548-4445.) ♦ Dec. 21 at 6: Samuel Menashe and Michael Dorr read from their poetry. (Knitting Factory, 74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. 219-3055.)

TALK
Dec. 18 at 7: J. Richard Gott, the author of "Time Travel in Einstein's Universe," uses clips from "Star Trek" and other films to address the notion of time travel. (American Museum of Natural History, Central Park W. at 79th St. 769-5100.)

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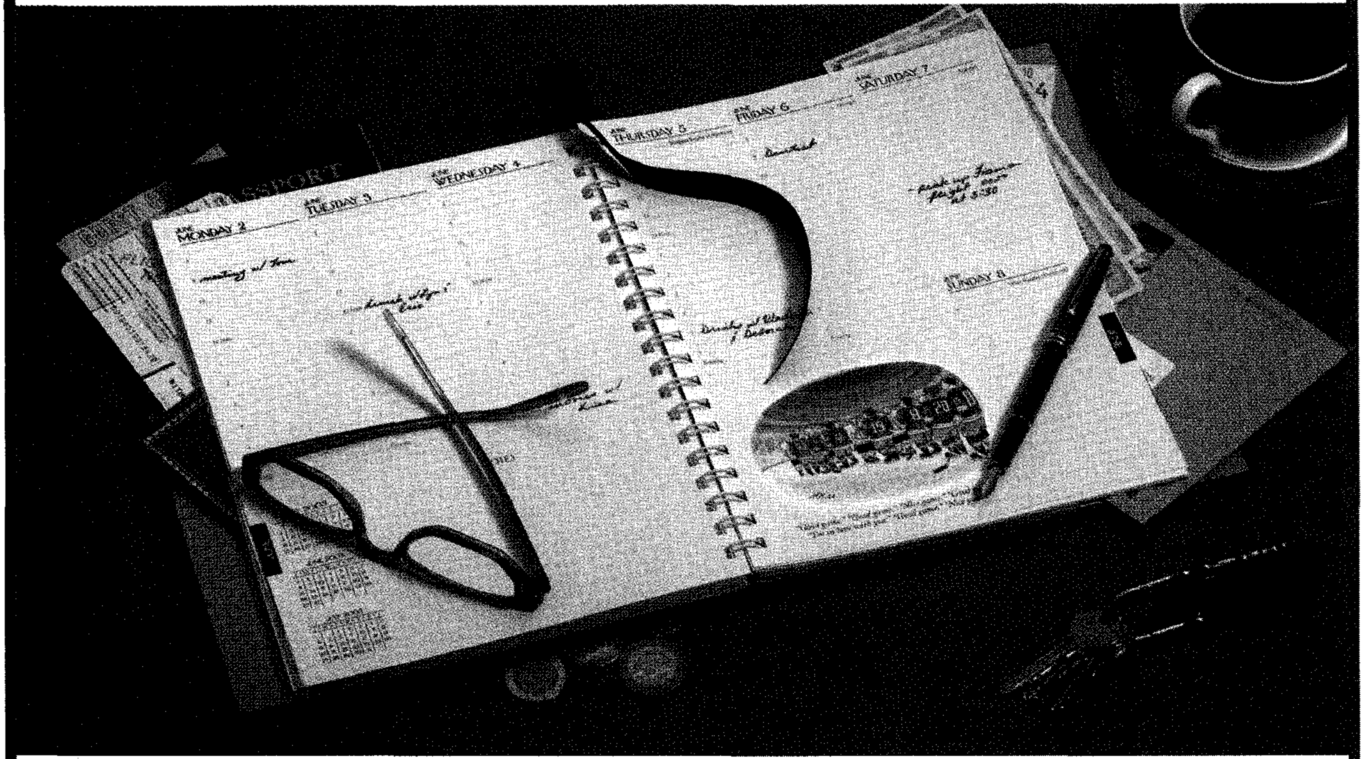

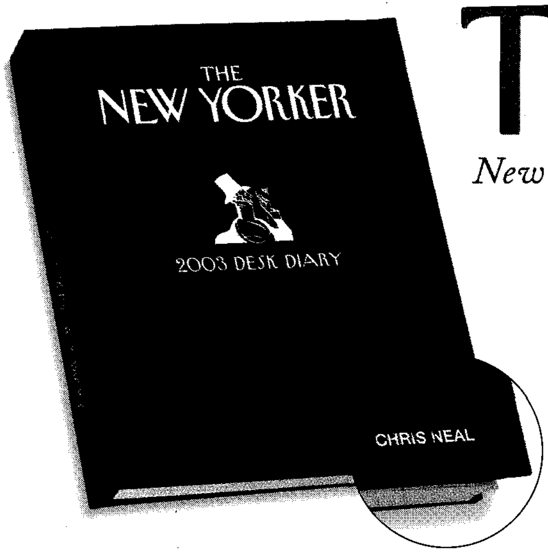

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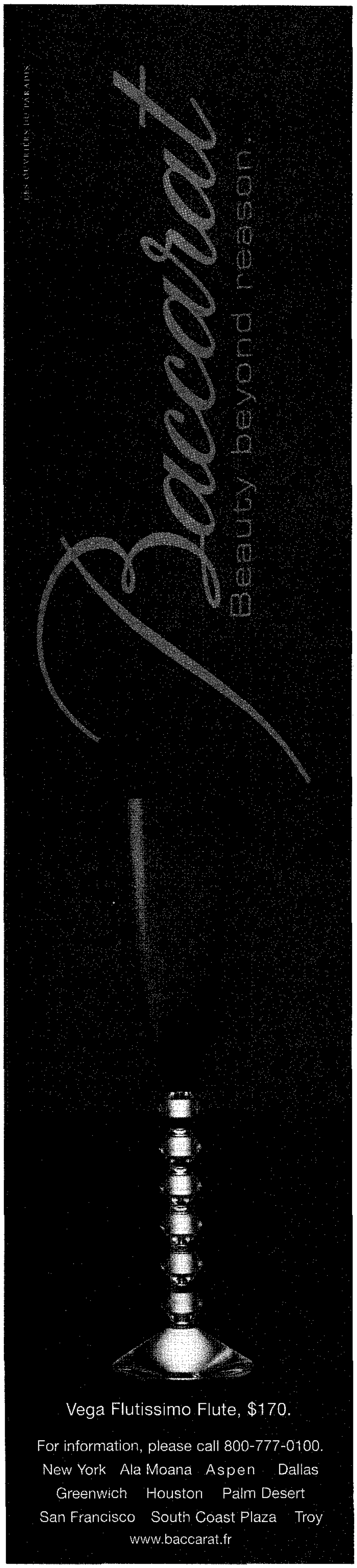

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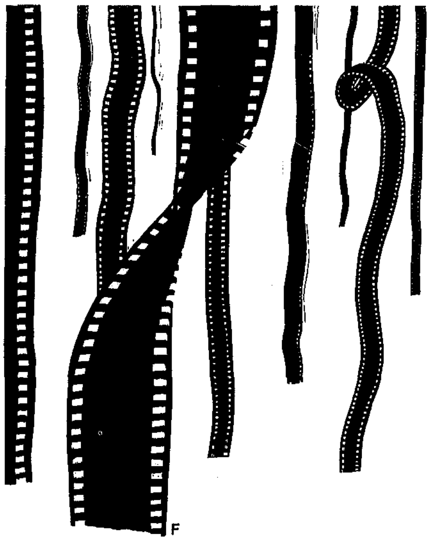

MOVIES OPENING

ANTWONE FISHER
In his directorial début, Denzel Washington plays a naval psychiatrist who mentors an angry, volatile sailor (Derek Luke). Opening Dec. 19.

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 25.

CHICAGO
An adaptation of the Broadway musical, set in the nineteen-twenties, in which two night-club entertainers vie for tabloid fame and celebrity. With Catherine Zeta-Jones, Renée Zellweger, and Richard Gere. Directed by Rob Marshall. Opening Dec. 27.

CONFESSIONS OF A DANGEROUS MIND
George Clooney directs a script by Charlie Kaufman about the life of Chuck Barris (Sam Rockwell), the host of "The Gong Show," who also claimed to be a C.I.A. operative. With Julia Roberts and Drew Barrymore. Opening Dec. 31.

DEVILS ON THE DOORSTEP
A drama set in China during the Japanese occupation, about two prisoners left to fend for themselves in a rural village. Jiang Wen directed and plays one of the leads. In Mandarin and Japanese. Opening Dec. 18. (Film Forum.)

GANGS OF NEW YORK
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 20.

THE HOURS
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 27.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS
Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening Dec. 18.

LOVE LIZA
Philip Seymour Hoffman plays a Web-site designer trying to make sense of his wife's suicide, in a drama written by his brother Gordy Hoffman. With Kathy Bates. Opening Dec. 30.

MAX
A drama set in Munich after the First World War, about an art-gallery owner (John Cusack) who meets Adolf Hitler (Noah Taylor) as a young painter. With Molly Parker and Leelee Sobieski. Opening Dec. 27.

MORVERN CALLAR
Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening Dec. 20.

NARC
Jason Patric plays a narcotics officer investigating the killing of a rookie cop, in a thriller written and directed by Joe Carnahan. With Ray Liotta as Patric's partner. Opening Dec. 20.

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY
Douglas McGrath ("Emma") brings the Charles Dickens novel to the big screen with a cast that includes Charlie Hunman, Anne Hathaway, Christopher Plummer, Jim Broadbent, and Miranda Richardson. Opening Dec. 27.

THE PIANIST
Roman Polanski's new film is a bio-pic about the composer and pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman (Adrien Brody), who lived in the Warsaw ghetto during the Second World War. Opening Dec. 27.

PINOCCHIO
An adaptation of the fairy tale, written and directed by Roberto Benigni, who also stars. In Italian. Opening Dec. 25.

SONNY
Nicolas Cage directed this drama set in New Orleans, in which a former gigolo (James Franco), employed by his mother (Brenda Blethyn), tries to leave the family business behind. With Mena Suvari and Scott Caan. Opening Dec. 27.

25TH HOUR
Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening Dec. 19.

TWO WEEKS NOTICE
Hugh Grant is a pampered billionaire and Sandra Bullock his fed-up lawyer, in a romantic comedy directed by Marc Lawrence. Opening Dec. 20.

THE WILD THORNBERRIES MOVIE
The animated television show from Nickelodeon comes to the big screen. Opening Dec. 20.

FILM NOTES

ABOUT SCHMIDT
Alexander Payne's last movie, "Election," was unpleasant, timely, and as sharp as a nib. His new movie is unpleasant, indecisive, and about as cheering as a damp fog. Jack Nicholson plays the eponymous Schmidt, who leaves a long career in insurance and slumps into graceless retirement. His wife (June Squibb) dies, whereupon his daughter (Hope Davis) takes over the household; soon enough, the aging male is left alone, and we are left to ponder the mismatch—unresolved by Payne—between Schmidt the early fusspot and Schmidt the emerging slob, with a riot of used food packaging at his feet. After that, the movie takes to the road, like a late, soft aftermath to "Five Easy Pieces." But the Nicholson of that film made hard choices; here he plays to the viewers' cultish worship of Jack the Lad, and even the saddest scenes have flourishes of rumpled clowning. A picture that aimed to celebrate a regular guy winds up endorsing his comic disdain for the stale lives around him. With Dermot Mulroney, Kathy Bates, and a hot tub that has seen it all.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/16/02.) (Lincoln Square and Union Square.)

ADAPTATION
The hero of the new experimental comedy by the writer Charlie Kaufman and the director Spike Jonze ("Being John Malkovich") is Kaufman himself, played by Nicolas Cage. He's in a dreadful quandary, having signed on to adapt Susan Orlean's "The Orchid Thief," which grew out of a 1995 article in this magazine. "Great sprawling *New Yorker* stuff," Charlie calls the book, by which he means it's a screenwriter's nightmare—ruminative, descriptive, but lacking the clear kind of "arc" that can be shovelled into a movie. Cage's Charlie, a malcontent who wears a flannel shirt in Los Angeles, works himself into a fury of self-loathing, and, for about an hour, the movie is a funny, deft metafiction that jumps back and forth among Charlie's feverish self-doubts, his erotic fantasies, and the story he is attempting to write. We see that story: Orlean (Meryl Streep) tags along with John Laroche (Chris Cooper), a Florida man who was arrested while stealing a rare form of orchid from a state wilderness preserve. Unsocialized but erudite, a moralist, a theorist, a swamp-bred crank, Laroche fascinates the melancholy Orlean, who feels her life lacks a consuming passion. The performances are all expert, especially Cooper's, but the movie takes a disastrous leap into melodrama at the end, which can be interpreted as either a sellout to Hollywood convention or a savage self-parody of selling out. Either way, it's a mistake.—*David Denby* (12/9/02) (Empire 25, Lincoln Square, and Sunshine Cinema.)

ANALYZE THAT
Robert De Niro and Billy Crystal, along with the director Harold Ramis, return with this unimaginative sequel to their 1999 mobster-in-therapy hit.

This time, De Niro's gangster shtick is embarrassingly stiff (at one point he flounces around singing a tune from "West Side Story"), and Crystal is unable to produce anything witty from his rapid-fire psychobabble. The film, sloppy and joyless, even strands the great Lisa Kudrow, with her perfect comic timing.—*Bruce Diones* (Battery Park 16, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Twin, 19th Street East 6, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Village Theatre VII.)

ARARAT

A complicated, not to say confusing, movie from Atom Egoyan. His subject is the massacre of the Armenians in 1915—a matter of abiding pain and significance to those of Armenian descent, such as the director himself. He approaches the problem from different angles: there is a historical epic film, then the story of how that epic itself was cast and shot, then a delving into the lives of its performers, and so forth. There is even a long, implausible interview between a customs inspector (Christopher Plummer) and a young Armenian (David Alpay) who has just arrived in Canada; as the subplots ramify, we watch the effect of the genocide—as it is unequivocally called by its victims—on lives both close and distant. The trouble is that you can feel the history being used as much as examined; what is required, not least for American audiences, is an unerring clarity, and what they get is a stylish, near-numbing deadpan of mystification.—*A.L.* (11/18/02) (Angelika Film Center, Kew Gardens Cinema, and Lincoln Square.)

Opening December 20, "Morvern Callar," with Samantha Morton.

LARA TOMLIN

THE AWFUL TRUTH

A classic 1937 screwball comedy, about one of old Hollywood's favorite subjects: the divorced couple who almost bed down with new mates but get back together. Irene Dunne and Cary Grant are the sparring partners, and Ralph Bellamy plays just about the same role he later played in "His Girl Friday." Irene Dunne's way with a quip is to smile brightly and wring it dry, but she's at her best here. Joyce Compton plays the night-club performer whom Dunne parodies, and the cast includes Esther Dale, Cecil Cunningham, and Alex D'Arcy. Leo McCarey's direction is first-rate; in a memorable sequence toward the end, Grant tries to persuade a door to open without visible assistance.—*Pauline Kael* (Walter Reade Theatre; Dec. 27-28.)

8 MILE

In Eminem's first movie, the white rap star plays a barely disguised version of his pre-celebrity self: Jimmy Smith, Jr., a wounded young man who lives in a trailer in inner-city Detroit with his slatternly mother (Kim Basinger). During jousts at a local club, Jimmy goes up against the best black rappers and fights for the respect of the black audience. These improvised raps are his only release, a spasmodic assertion of self. Curtis Hanson, working from a script by Scott Silver, lays out the narrative and the character relationships methodically, even slowly. The movie may be a shrewdly engineered piece of proletarian pop in the tradition of "Rocky" and "Saturday Night Fever," but Eminem's vile candor gives it a convincingly gritty tone, and the great Mexican cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto ("Amores Perros") keeps the visual palette ugly and raw.—*D.D.* (11/11/02) (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

FAR FROM HEAVEN

An immaculate new movie from Todd Haynes, the purveyor of "Safe" and "Velvet Goldmine." This project teams him once again with Julianne Moore, who looks set to become the Catherine Deneuve to Haynes's Buñuel. Here she plays—or incarnates, to the last inch of her hemline—a wife and mother, living in Hartford in 1957. All is well, if brittle, until she drops by to see her husband (Dennis Quaid) in his office after hours, and finds him entwined with a man. From here on, their lives start to shred and scatter; she herself falls for the gardener (Dennis Haysbert), who is not only black but, to all appearances, perfect. With tact and care, the movie digs into all the subjects that lay concealed below the surface when Max Ophuls and Douglas Sirk were filming their own melodramas in the nineteen-fifties. As an exercise in style, it cannot be faulted, and Moore takes us by surprise, even by storm, with the wealth and fullness of her feeling; yet there remains something prim in the whole endeavor—we know better than these beleaguered people did, and the movie

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—*The Seattle Times*

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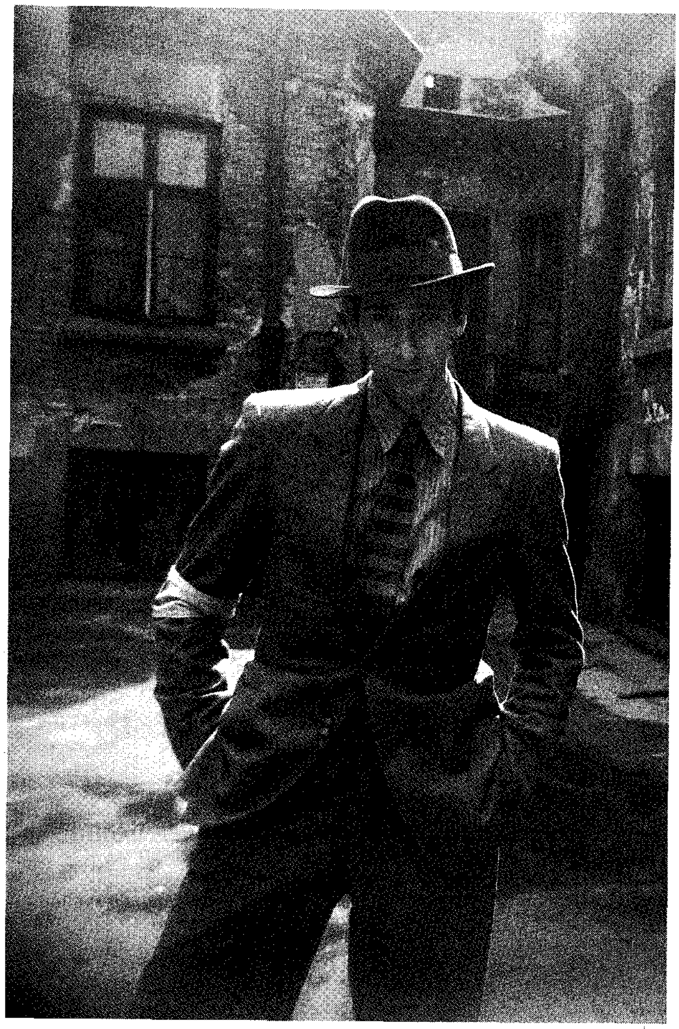
can hardly help congratulating us, and itself, on that knowledge.—*A.L.* (11/18/02) (Angelika Film Center, BAM Rose Cinemas, Chelsea Cinemas, East 85th Street, Kew Gardens Cinema, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and 72nd Street East.)

FRIDA

At the center of Julie Taymor's vibrant bio-pic is the relationship (always described as "tempestuous") between the great Mexican muralist Diego Rivera (Alfred Molina) and the talented painter Frida Kahlo (Salma Hayek). After an hour or so of this Punch-and-Judy show, with its noisy drinking, hurling of kitchen items, partings, and reconciliations, you may want to knock both lovers flat with an enormous chili pepper. Yet "Frida" is much better than it has any right to be. The movie has a rambunctious spirit and a liberated sense of color—an appreciation of the raw, strong Mexican folk tradition that gave both artists their special juice. Taymor and a gaggle of screenwriters are much too shrewd to accept the sentimental feminist view that Frida was Diego Rivera's victim. Smart, willful, and perverse, this Frida is nobody's servant, and the tiny Hayek plays her with head held high.—*D.D.* (11/11/02) (Angelika Film Center, Battery Park 16, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, New York Twin, and 19th Street East 6.)



Adrien Brody in Roman Polanski's "The Pianist."

SYLVIA PLACHY

HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

Two down, presumably five to go, and already the franchise is entering dangerous territory: if you aren't one of the many who know their Harry Potter chapter and verse, prepare for a nap. Like its predecessor, the movie is overlong and devoutly faithful to the book: the director Chris Columbus does everything but film J. K. Rowling's semicolons. Most of the original cast returns—a good thing—but so do many of the limp visual ideas. Kenneth Branagh, in a hammy role, makes for a welcome addition to the Hogwarts faculty, and it would have been fun to see him mix it up more with Alan Rickman. But all of the what-ifs matter little, as Columbus's film won't disappoint an eager audience that often calls out Harry's next move before it happens.—*Michael Agger* (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, Cinema 1, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Olympia I and II, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

INTACTO

An oddity from the Spanish director Juan Carlos Fresnadillo. The premise—that good fortune can be exchanged, bargained, or stolen—makes for creepy and unpredictable turns. The movie follows four people, innately lucky, who gamble their gifts against one another in a deadly game of last man standing. As engrossing as this thriller is, and as strikingly visual as it can be at times, the unwieldy narrative frustrates the tension. The film ends up being a curiosity—more admirable for its promise than its success. In Spanish.—*B.D.* (Quad Cinema.)

KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS

This tart 1949 black comedy on the craving for social position and the art of murder has a brittle wit that came as a bit of a shock: such amoral lines were not generally spoken in forties movies. The film is heartless, and that is the secret of its elegance. Ninth in line to inherit a dukedom, the insouciant young hero (Dennis Price) systematically eliminates the intervening eight: a snob, a general, a photographer, an admiral, a suffragette, a clergyman, a banker, and the duke—all, by a casting stroke of genius, played by Alec Guinness. Secure in the knowledge that Guinness will return in another form, the audience suffers no regret as each abominable D'Ascoyne is coolly dispatched. And as the murderer takes us further into his confidence with each foul deed, we positively look forward to his next success. With purring little Joan Greenwood as the minx-nemesis Sybilla, Valerie Hobson as the high-minded Edith, and Miles Malleson as the executioner.—*P.K.* (Gramercy Theatre; Dec. 26 and Dec. 28.)

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS

With nary a prologue, Peter Jackson dives right back into the fiery pits and elfin twilight of Middle Earth. A sane man would have pared back the epic story lines, and perhaps even killed off a hobbit or two, but Jackson chooses to expand his canvas. His love of the material is evident in every frame, from the engraved helmets of the men of Rohan to the polish applied to Tolkien's sub-Shakespearean dialogue. He and his team have even carved out a niche for humor—lots of dwarf jokes—and a love triangle involving Viggo Mortensen and Liv Tyler. The difficulty with "The Lord of the Rings" is that it's a schizophrenic tale, part interior descent into madness (the power of the ring over Frodo) and part apocalypse then (the gargantuan battles fought between men and the forces of darkness). The exceptional cast handles the smaller, intimate moments with élan, particularly Tyler and Elijah Wood, actors who need little modification to look at home in Middle Earth. Jackson continually plays with perspective, keeping the frame alive. He relies on special effects for the battle scenes, with mixed results, although a monumental charge toward the film's end is one for the ages. With Bernard Hill as a horseman-king, a computer-generated Gollum, who steals a scene or two, and New Zealand, in a starring role.—*M.A.* (Astor Plaza, Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Twin, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

MORVERN CALLAR

Samantha Morton plays the title character in Lynne Ramsay's dark and sensuous portrait of a young Scottish woman who, after her boyfriend's suicide, embarks on an existential journey, as mesmerizing and baffling to her as it is to the audience. As she travels from a dead-end job to a European holiday (accompanied by her best friend, played with party-animal enthusiasm by Kathleen McDermott), the movie's slow narrative tempo begins to entrance. Morton's performance, easily her best, is charismatically impassive. There's a gorgeous strangeness to Ramsay's movie, a distinctive and alluring visual language, and a sound design that keeps the dialogue to a minimum—the film feels like it's floating in ether.—*B.D.* (Cinema Village.)

PERSONAL VELOCITY

In a rare coup, the author Rebecca Miller adapts and directs three of her own short stories. The film, a triptych, is beautifully calibrated: the stories resonate among each other, and the cumulative impression is one of heady yet delicate intelligence. Kyra Sedgwick, Parker Posey, and Fairuza Balk reach deep into their characters' dilemmas for performances that are remarkably vivid and vulnerable (one character regains her sexual power, another discovers her maternal instinct). Miller's direction, like her prose, displays an unaffected intimacy.—*B.D.* (Angelika Film Center, BAM Rose Cinemas, and First & 62nd Cinemas.)

RUSSIAN ARK

A guide to the treasures of the Hermitage, a rueful glance down the vistas of Russian history, or a show of technical prowess: take your pick. Alexander Sokurov, the creator of "Mother and Son," proves that his singular method—at once earthy and transcendent—is gaining strength and width. The new film unwinds in one take, lasting ninety minutes, and by some miracle we grow happily accustomed to its rhythm, like children held rapt by a bedtime story. The camera glides through galleries as if it were the eye of an invisible visitor; ahead is a black-coated stranger, who accosts passers-by and clucks tenderly, if critically, over the art. Sokurov has made not a documentary, however careful his inspection of painted surfaces, but a collection of small, sorrowful dramas—wait for the imperial children, or the blind woman caressing a marble sculpture. The effect is impenetrable, yet the film is blessed with clarity; maybe, if you spend that much time among Old Masters, they start to rub off on you. In Russian.—*A.L.* (12/16/02) (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

SOLARIS

Jeremy Davies, who played the cowardly soldier in "Saving Private Ryan," is the only enjoyable element in Steven Soderbergh's painful exercise in higher solemnity. Davies has foxy eyes and a dark silky beard, and he speaks in brief phrases propelled by the darting, angular movements of his hands. The Kabuki style of movement is so eccentrically hip that it cracks up an audience puzzled by the goings on in a spaceship whose crew members have been haunted by replicants of dead friends and lovers—replicants formed out of the crew members' memories. The dialogue, which Soderbergh wrote himself (the material comes from a novel by Stanislaw Lem and a Russian film version from 1972, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky), largely consists of rhetorical questions and sentence fragments, and the mood of frozen bewilderment is sustained by a color scheme of varying shades of blue and by electronic music that arrives in prolonged slabs, pinning your brain to the base of your skull. With George Clooney, Nata-

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scha McElhone, and Viola Davis.—*D.D.* (12/9/02) (Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Olympia I and II, 62nd & Broadway, 34th Street Theatre, Union Square, and Ziegfeld.)

TALK TO HER

In Pedro Almodóvar's odd but touching romantic drama, two very different men are drawn together by a common task: taking care of women who have fallen into a coma. Benigno (Javier Cámara), a shy, seemingly asexual young male nurse, looks after Alicia (Leonor Watling), a beautiful ballet dancer. Marco (Darío Grandinetti), a fortyish Argentine writer, becomes the lover of a fierce, long-waisted female bullfighter (Rosario Flores). After she is gored in the ring, she never speaks again. Both love affairs are touched by fantasy. Almodóvar's point appears to be that you can't have love without fable—that every love affair is an improbable narrative wrung from non-being and loneliness. The movie is shot in a new, subdued style for the director: past and present flow together, and everything seems touched with a melancholy magic. Two ballets by the choreographer Pina Bausch are integral to the film's themes. In Spanish.—*D.D.* (11/25/02) (Chelsea Cinemas, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Sunshine Cinema.)

25TH HOUR

The latest Spike Lee joint is a self-consciously post-9/11 movie, shot through with the melancholy spirit of aftermath. The opening credits use the Tribute in Light near Ground Zero to haunting effect, and the main character, Edward Norton, becomes a stand-in for the city itself. Lee's visual dexterity is without question, but the movie flounders under its dual purpose of delivering a dark valentine to the city and just telling its story. Norton plays a clean-living drug dealer on his way to jail for seven years. Someone snitched on him, but he's not sure who. As Norton goes about his last day, Lee serves up whole subcultures of New York in fresh, fragrant slabs. We get the sports-profanity shorthand of the trading room, the urban playground with cigarette-smoking schoolgirls, the scratch artists presiding over the neon dance floors. The dialogue feels improvised, hyperverbal, and Lee gives the talented cast a chance to cut loose. Barry Pepper excels as an alpha broker, and Philip Seymour Hoffman is brilliant yet again as the kind of creepy sexual introvert he seems to specialize in. Anna Paquin has a particularly good moment as a Lolita recognizing her power. The movie doesn't succeed in a conventional suspenseful way, but it captures a mood.—*M.A.* (Empire 25, Lincoln Square, and Village Theatre VII.)

ALSO PLAYING

BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE (10/28/02)
BAM Rose Cinemas, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, 19th Street East 6, and Sunshine Cinema.

MAID IN MANHATTAN
Battery Park 16, Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.

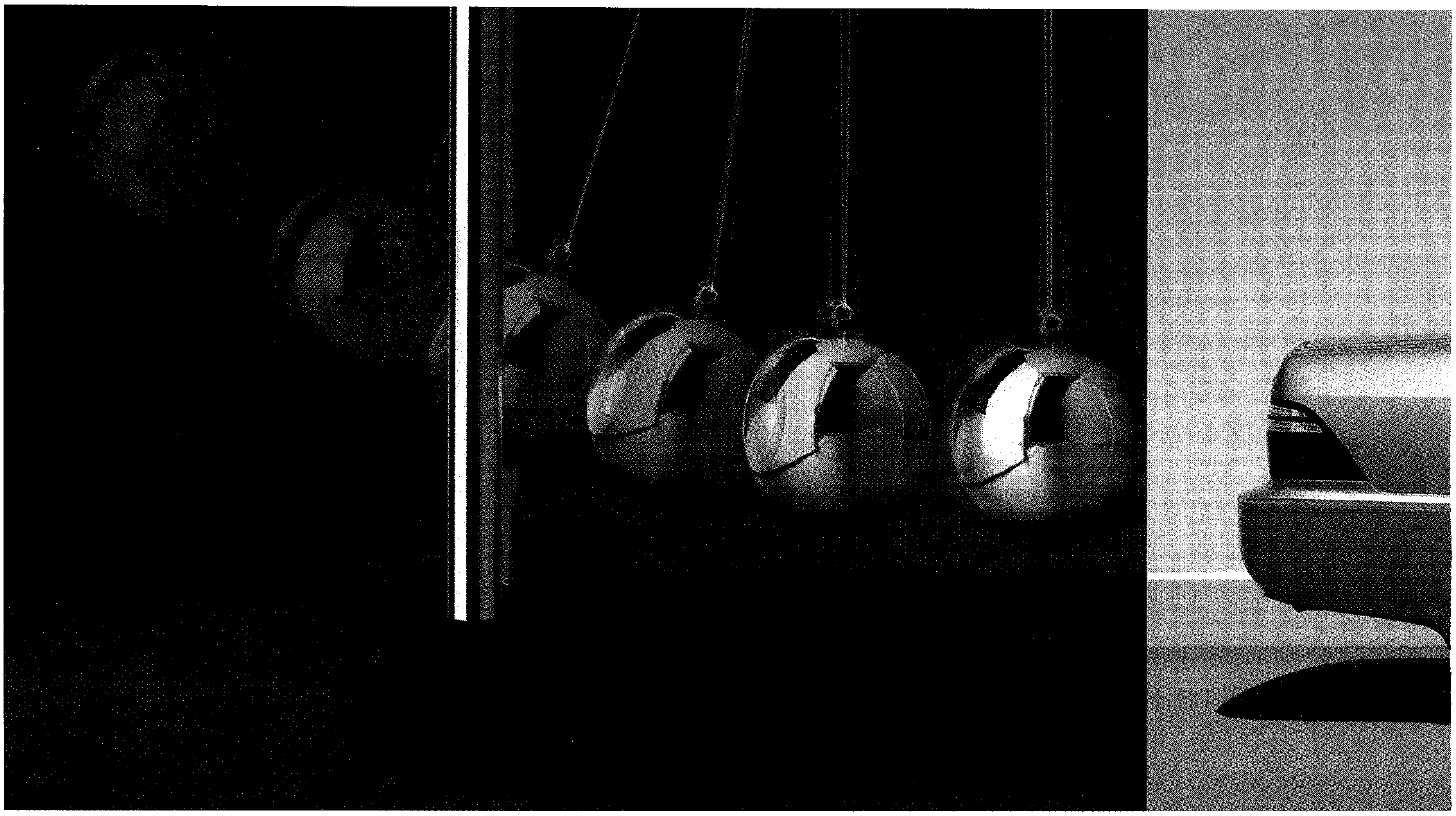
POWER AND TERROR: NOAM CHOMSKY IN OUR TIMES
Film Forum.

RABBIT-PROOF FENCE
Paris and Sunshine Cinema.

THEATRE ADDRESSES

Unless noted, call 777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
BAM Rose Cinemas, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn.
Battery Park 16, West St. at Vesey St.
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinemas 1, 2, and 3, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (924-3363).
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
Empire 25, on 42nd St. near Eighth Ave. (398-3939).
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Kew Gardens Cinema, 81-05 Lefferts Blvd., Queens (718-441-9835).
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St. (757-2280).
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Twin, Broadway at 99th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Olympia I and II, Broadway at 107th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (688-3800).
Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 125 E. 86th St.
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
The Screening Room, 54 Varick St. (334-2100).
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
Sunshine Cinema, 139-143 E. Houston St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
34th Street Theatre, 312 W. 34th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.



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REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—Through Dec. 29: The films of Martin Scorsese. Dec. 18 at 7: "Gangs of New York" (2002), followed by a dialogue with the screenwriter Jay Cocks. ♦ Dec. 21-22 at 2: "A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies" (1995). ♦ Dec. 28-29: "My Voyage to Italy" (2001). ♦ Repertory nights. Dec. 21-22 at 6:30: "Never on Sunday" (1960, Jules Dassin). ♦ Dec. 28-29 at 6:30: "The Passion of Anna" (1969, Ingmar Bergman; in Swedish).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-777-3456)—Dec. 18 at 5 and 8:15 and Dec. 19 at 8:30: "Stalker" (1979, Andrei Tarkovsky; in Russian). ♦ Dec. 19 at 7: "Zvenigora" (1927, Aleksandr Dovzhenko; silent). The repertory program will continue on Feb. 13.

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110)—Dec. 20-26 at 1, 2:50, 4:40, 6:30, 8:20, and 10:10: "Il Posto" (1961, Ermanno Olmi; in Italian). ♦ Starting Dec. 27 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "The Apartment" (1960, Billy Wilder).

GRAMERCY THEATRE
127 E. 23rd St. (777-4900)—Dec. 18-23: "Documentary Fortnight," two weeks of nonfiction film. Dec. 19 at 2: Several short works about 9/11. ♦ Dec. 19 at 4:30: "Afghan Alphabet" (2002, Mohsen Makhmalbaf; in Farsi). ♦ Dec. 19 at 6:30: "War and Peace" (2002, Anand Patwardhan; in English, Hindi, Japanese, and Marathi). ♦ Dec. 20 at 2: "Rocket Experts" (2002, Jane Steuerwald) and "Hand on the Pulse" (2002, Joyce Warshow). ♦ Dec. 20 at 4: "Sister Helen" (2001, Rob Fruchtman and Rebecca Cammisa). ♦ Dec. 20 at 6:15: "A Tribute to the Director: Anand Patwardhan" (2002). ♦ Dec. 20 at 8:30: "A Bookshelf on Top of the Sky" (2002, Claudia Heuermann). ♦ Dec. 21 at 1: "Confession" (2001, Marina Petrovskaia; in English and Russian) and "A Hungarian Passport" (2001, Sandra Kogut; in English, Portuguese, and Hungarian). ♦ Dec. 21 at 3:30: Five shorts by Jonathan Calm (2001-02). ♦ Dec. 21 at 5:30: "OT: Our Town" (2002, Scott Hamilton Kennedy). ♦ Dec. 21 at 8: "Red Light Go: Alleycat Racing in New York City" (2002, Ben Barraud, Toby Barraud, and Manny Kivowitz). ♦ Dec. 22 at 1: "Some Real Heat" (2001, Stefanie Jordan). ♦ Dec. 22 at 3: "Coal Bucket Outlaw" (2002, Tom Hansell) and "An Injury to One" (2002, Travis Wilkerson). ♦ Dec. 22 at 6: "This and That, and Other Minor Misunderstandings" (2001, Edin Vélez; in English, Spanish, and French) and "Papa" (2001, Jon Alpert). ♦ Dec. 23 at 3: "Past Perfect" (2002, Cynthia Madansky) and "Minor Visions" (2001, Denise Iris; in Romanian). ♦ Dec. 23 at 6: "Reconstruction" (2001, Irene Luszig). ♦ Dec. 23 at 8:30: "Memories of a Forgotten War" (2001, Camilla Benolirao Griggers and Sari Lluch Dalena; in Tagalog). ♦ Through Jan. 30: "*Positif* Champions: Fifty Years of Cinema," a celebration of the French film monthly. Dec. 26 at 2: "The African Queen" (1951, John Huston). ♦ Dec. 26 at 4 and Dec. 28 at 5: "Kind Hearts and Coronets" (†). ♦ Dec. 26 at 6:15: "California Split" (1974, Robert Altman). ♦ Dec. 26 at 8:30: "Kiss Me Deadly" (1955, Robert Aldrich). ♦ Dec. 27 at 2: "Van Gogh" (1991, Maurice Pialat; in French). ♦ Dec. 27 at 5:30: "Cleo from 5 to 7" (1962, Agnès Varda; in French). ♦ Dec. 27 at 7:30: "Repulsion" (1965, Roman Polanski). ♦ Dec. 28 at 1: "The Errand Boy" (1961, Jerry Lewis). ♦ Dec. 28 at 3: "The Ladies' Man" (1961, Lewis). ♦ Dec. 28 at 7:15: "Hiroshima, Mon Amour" (1959, Alain Resnais; in French). ♦ Dec. 28 at 9: "Excalibur" (1981, John Boorman). ♦ Dec. 29 at 1: "Fargo" (1996, Joel Coen). ♦ Dec. 29 at 3:30: "Fanny and Alexander" (1982, Ingmar Bergman; in Swedish). ♦ Dec. 29 at 7: "A Clockwork Orange" (1971, Stanley Kubrick).

SUNSHINE CINEMA
139-143 E. Houston St. (358-0573)—Midnight movies. Dec. 20-21: "Ferris Bueller's Day Off" (1986, John Hughes). ♦ Dec. 27-28: "The Hand That Rocks the Cradle" (1992, Curtis Hanson).

THALIA THEATRE
2537 Broadway, at 95th St. (864-5400)—Dec. 21-22 and Dec. 28-29 at 2:30, 5, and 7:30: "Metropolis" (1927, Fritz Lang).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (875-5600)—Through Dec. 26: "Spanish Cinema Now." Dec. 18 at 1:30 and 6:30 and Dec. 21 at 9: "Perdita Durango" (1997, Alex de la Iglesia). ♦ Dec. 18 at 4 and 9 and Dec. 22 at 8: "Dying of Laughter" (1999, de la Iglesia). ♦ Dec. 19 at 1, 4:30, and 8:10: "Aro Tolbukhin: The Mind of a Killer" (2002, Agustí Villaronga, Lydia Zimmermann, and Isaac P. Racine). ♦ Dec. 19 at 3 and 6:30: "Memories of Guerilla Warfare" (2002, Javier Corcuera). ♦ Dec. 20 at 2 and 6:15 and Dec. 21 at 4:15: "Carol's Journey" (2002, Imanol Uribe). ♦ Dec. 20 at 4:15 and 8:30: "Sola Mia" (2001, Javier Balaguer). ♦ Dec. 21 at 2 and Dec. 24 at 1 and 5:15: "The Impatient Alchemist" (2002, Patricia Ferreira). ♦ Dec. 21 at 6:30 and Dec. 23 at 3:30 and 8:30: "The City Without Limits" (2002, Antonio Hernández). ♦ Dec. 22 at 5:30 and Dec. 23 at 1 and 6: "Beyond Desire" (2002, Gerardo Vera). ♦ Dec. 24 at 3:15 and 7:30 and Dec. 26 at 3:15 and 7:30: "Lázaro's Girlfriend" (2002, Fernando Merinero). ♦ Dec. 26 at 1 and 5:15: "La Comunidad" (2000, de la Iglesia). ♦ Dec. 26 at 9:30: "800 Bullets" (2002, de la Iglesia). ♦ Starting Dec. 27: "People Are Funny: The Films of Leo McCarey." Dec. 27 at 1, 5, and 9 and Dec. 28 at 3 and 7: "The Awful Truth" (†). ♦ Dec. 27 at 3 and 7 and Dec. 28 at 1, 5, and 9: "Make Way for Tomorrow" (1937). ♦ Dec. 29 at 1 and 6: "My Son John" (1952). ♦ Dec. 29 at 3:30 and 8:30 and Dec. 30 at 1 and 6: "Good Sam" (1948). ♦ Dec. 30 at 3:30 and 8:30: "Once Upon a Honeymoon" (1942). ♦ Dec. 31 at 1 and 5:30: "Love Affair" (1942). ♦ Dec. 31 at 3 and 7:30: "An Affair to Remember" (1957).

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CARRYING THE TORCH AT THE HOTEL FLAMBEAU

There is an undeniable void in American culture today and naturally, the only way to fill it is to create more celebrities.

We have no lack of vacuous movie stars, television spokesmodels, arrogant athletes, and political pundits who make up for absence of insight with pungent personalities. What we need is a new breed of elite – a group of brilliant, irrepressible artisans upon whom we can rely for sparkling but malicious commentary, juicy gossip and intelligently notorious behavior. What we need is a modern equivalent of the Algonquin Round Table, where the likes of Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley met regularly to share wit, sharpen perspective and exploit insecurity.

While no contemporary geometric shape could survive comparison with that esteemed circle, there does exist a collection of influential, outrageous characters worthy of note. These free spirits meet regularly for lunch at an oval table in the dining room of the Hotel Flambeau. In the interest of shifting the balance of contemporary culture, even slightly, from mass consumption of mediocrity to tasteful appreciation of irreverent revelry, we present the founding members of the Flambeau Oval.

Alexander Tittleton, Jr. – social gadfly and heir to the Tittleton Imports empire. Mr. Tittleton was an avid ski jumper until an untimely accident on his homemade catapult, The Cumulus Avenger. All of his hobbies now include a chair, including playing soprano sax with the The Billie Whitford Duo. His favorite drink is The Tittleton Thimbler: 1 part VOX® Vodka, a splash of tonic, and a dribble of grapefruit juice, served in a silver, engraved demitasse. His favorite toast, systematically directed to Ms. Pelligan, is "Time to dip the bill, old bird!"

Honoria Pelligan – magistrate for the New York District Court of Appeals until disbarment inspired her to pursue a literary career. Under the pen name Mrs. Ridgel, she authored a collection of criminology books for children. She is still prone to make the occasional pronouncement. Sitting quietly for long periods of time with glass in hand, she will signal her intent by holding her mouth agape and raising her eyebrows, then loudly share a gem like, "If I had to live with an enormous bald spot like yours, Tittleton, I would be inclined to cover it with a doily!"

Chadwick Hedley – The title "toastmaster general," perhaps to everyone's relief, has remained vacant for years, but Mr. Hedley's penchant for extemporaneous public speaking, especially after cocktails, positions him as a prime candidate. While his poetry and essays have earned him moderate attention, his true calling seems to be harpooning friends and foes alike with barbs, toasts and tributes. Among his favorite victims is Ms. Punderman, whom he once described as "having all the conviction of an orange traffic pylon."

Elisa Barneveld Punderman – photo editor at *Dermatology Today*. Her personal collections of probing prints have been featured in galleries from Soho to Bangor, including her current offering "Weepers Jeepers" at The Newport Museum of Modern Imagery. In her spare time, she plays semi-professional poker and shows her prize terrier, Piñata. She is generous, jovial and outspoken – judging people on the strength of their character and the diameter of their pores. Her signature drink is The Rose of Jerico: VOX Vodka with splashes of grenadine and orange juice.

Geoffrey Gimbel French – earned a degree in aerodynamic engineering, then disappointed his father by succeeding as a dancer/choreographer on Broadway. He created a six-volume set of self-instruction videos called "French Hoof!", in which, for two entire volumes, he dances a Cajun Two-Step while rhythmically slapping the doorman outside the Helmsley-Carlton. While sipping a Hotfoot Martini (2 parts VOX Vodka, one part cinnamon liqueur and a splash of grenadine), Geoffrey shares profound societal critiques like "I believe the mock turtleneck sweater is to fashion what the Croissanwich is to French cuisine."

Morton P. Vanderlick – master manipulator of stocks, bonds and other things liquid, who appears on the surface to be a serious, driven-but-dry overachiever. Upon their first meeting, Mr. French remarked, "His stiff upper lip seems to have spread down his chin, around his jaw and throughout the neck and shoulders." But to everyone's delight, Morton's inhibitions melt at the table as he quickly transforms into an animated, rubber-faced sparkplug. His refreshment of choice is the "Blue Screw," two parts VOX Vodka with splashes of curacao and sour, stirred lightly and served over a dirty joke.

Emily Gaylord-Chubb – an art critic who views herself as "the eyes, ears, and smirk" of the fine art world. On any given day, "Chubbs" can be found strolling the galleries in the Village, hands behind her back, a smoldering cigarette pinned between her thin, painted lips. In characteristic, politically incorrect fashion, she's known to assess abstract painting as "self-indulgent hand spasms" and sculptures as "scratching posts." She is often obsessed with her friends' love lives, including Mr. Hedley's "parade of Rubenesque, common-law wives."

Granted, the creation of more celebrities may result in nothing more than a bit of passing amusement. But as you continue to observe the Oval closely, you'll find an aura of celebratory joy unique to discerning individuals who share life on a higher plane. To a degree, we are all a product of that which surrounds us. When we raise the bar on our endeavors and diversions, we are the better and the happier for it.

Next week: The Flambeau Oval Survives the Holidays

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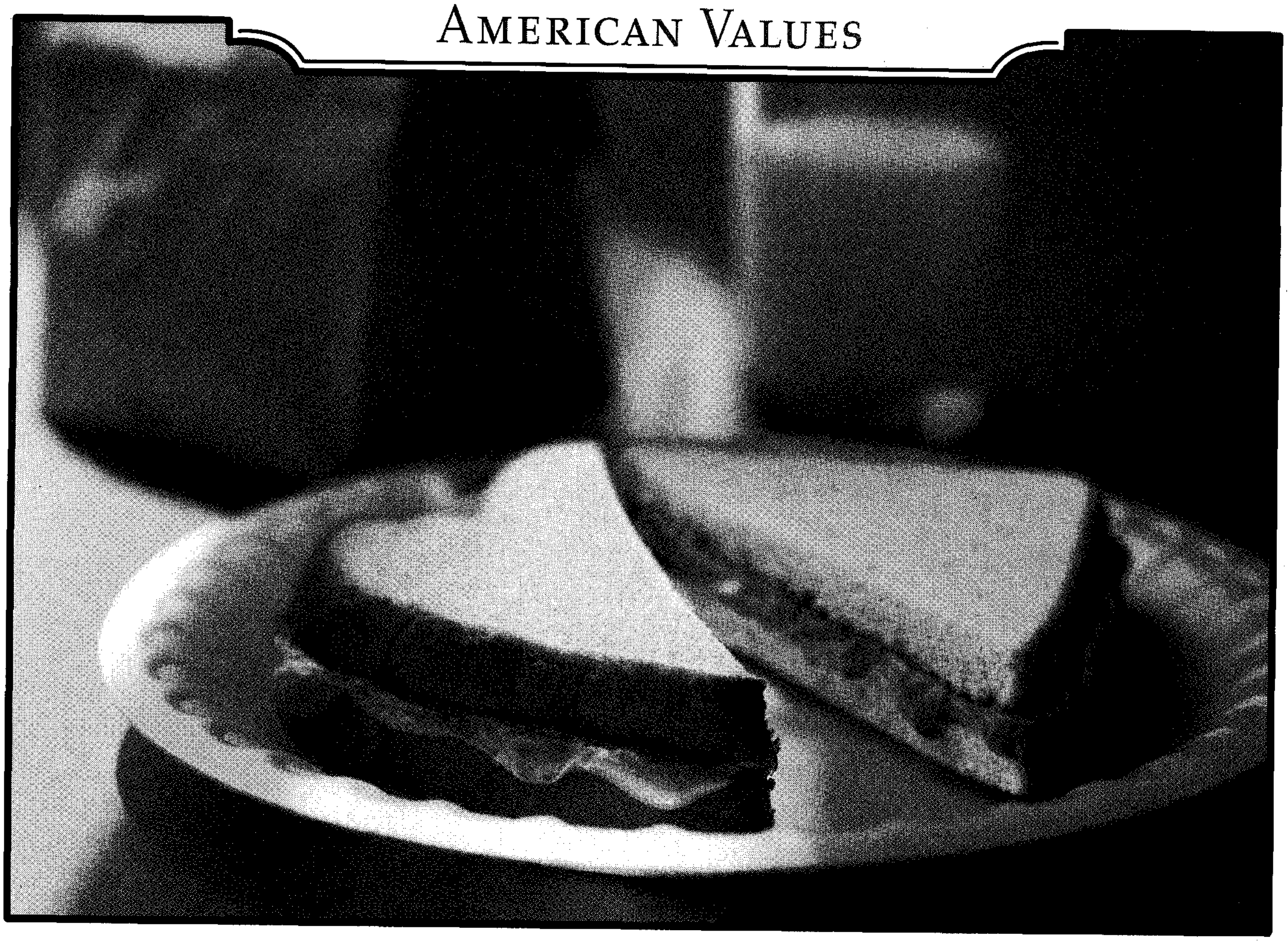

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THE NEW YORKER

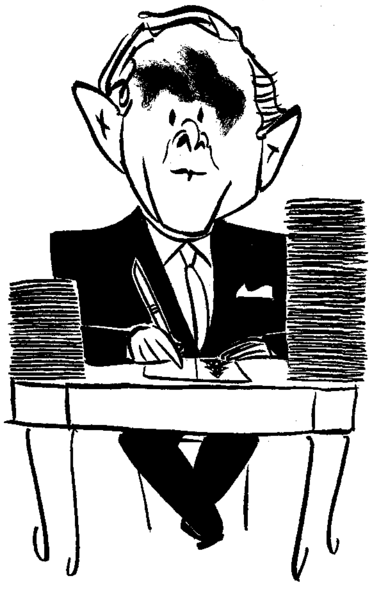
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THE POLITICS OF POLITESSE

One of the most striking trends in American politics in recent years has been the steady escalation in niceness coming from the White House. The baseline was set by Johnson and Nixon, who were, dispositionally, at the historical norm. Then there was Jimmy Carter, who had a kind of Sunday-school-teacher bonhomie (although one suspects that, on the eve of the White House Christmas party, he spent a little too much time working out who had been naughty and who had been nice). After Carter, the trend line starts to move upward: we had the abundantly genial Ronald Reagan, with his jars of jelly beans; George H. W. Bush, the master of the handwritten thank-you note; and Bill Clinton, the most charming and prolix Presidential dinner guest of the postwar era.

Now we have George W. Bush, who earlier this month sent out a million Hallmark Christmas cards to donors and Party stalwarts, each one tastefully adorned with a painting of the White House grand piano and an inscription, from Psalm 100, about the Lord's mercy and truth enduring "to all generations." What could be nicer? Clinton, in his final year, sent out four hundred thousand cards, and Eisenhower, who pioneered the tradition, sent out just eleven hundred, which means, for those of you connecting the dots, that the growth of Presidential niceness has not been merely linear. It has been exponential. And we are now in the steep part of the curve.

Just why our Presidents have been acting nicer is a good question, particularly since lots of thoughtful people (many, one suspects, of the sort to have made the President's Christmas-card list) maintain that as a society we've lost our manners. Presidential niceness—the explosion of personal touches and gracious notes—is evidently counter-cyclical; or, more precisely, the matter of their niceness is unrelated to the matter of our niceness. Our movies are becoming more and more tasteless; our culture grows debased. We're getting coarser. They're getting nicer.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

Nor is this niceness the traditional politician's politesse. Politics is about favors and privileges exchanged for votes. Politicians are generous toward us when it is in their interest to be so. It is the generosity of the salesman toward a customer. In politics, relationships are instrumental, and you could be as grouchy and sour as Richard Nixon and still play this game to perfection. The escalation of Presidential niceness represents something else: the rise of the politician as friend, whereby our Presidents are required to show the same virtues of kindness and generosity and warmth that we seek in those closest to us. John F. Kennedy's womanizing would be unacceptable today not because we are more prudish about sex than we were in 1960 but because we've come to view our Presidents under the powerful and exacting lens of friendship. All those women he slept with—did he call them the next day? Did he use protection? What if Jackie were to find out? *I'm just not sure I can be friends with a President who cheats on his wife.* Can you imagine how betrayed people would feel if George W. Bush were ever to behave caddishly to Laura? The bar, as of this month, is so much higher. "He seemed like such a nice man," at least a million voters would say, shaking their heads. "Why, just the other day he sent me the sweetest Christmas card . . ."

The problem, of course, is that niceness is overrated as a virtue. Many cultures are nice. The Southern antebellum aristocracy was marvellously well-mannered; its members left tasteful calling cards, entertained gracefully, and conducted their personal affairs with the utmost discretion. But they had few other virtues; in fact, it was the practice of niceness that helped to keep other values, such as fairness, at bay. Fairness sometimes requires that surfaces be disturbed, that patterns of cordiality be broken, and that people, rudely and abruptly, be removed from their place. Niceness is the enemy of fairness.

There are moments when we want niceness to triumph, and the Christmas season is one of them. That's why everyone gets a gift and everyone gets a card, even people we don't particular like or who don't particularly deserve our affection. Holidays, like birthdays, represent the temporary and necessary institutionalization of niceness. But the key word is "temporary": the rest of the year we are free to pursue worthier goals. These events are also personal rituals, and in our personal relationships it is appropriate to leaven what is right with what is nice. Governance is a different matter. In the past two years, the White House has been awfully nice to certain people, particularly those in the top two tax brackets. This Administration's idea of economic policy is to go from table to table at the Four Seasons discreetly asking patrons if they need help with the check. Such a nice man, our President! And, by the way, there'll be a little card waiting for you in the mailbox when you get home.

—*Malcolm Gladwell*

PROPAGANDA

CROSS-CULTURAL RAP

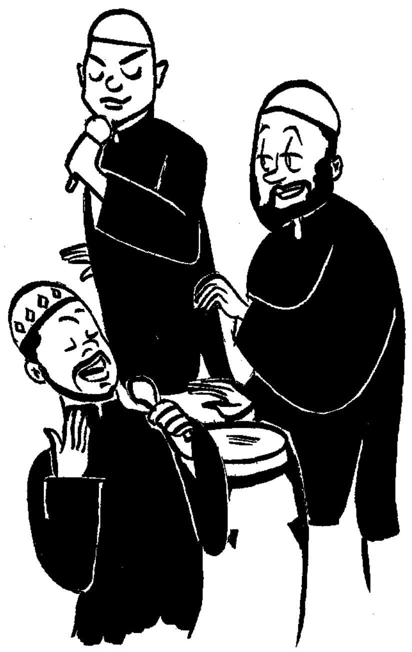
The rap-music industry has never had a particularly good working relationship with the United States government, nor have rap videos done much to dispel the notion abroad of America as a debased land full of Bentleys, Benjamins, and lascivious women. Nevertheless, a new kind of American rap group may be an integral part of the State Department's strategy to win the hearts and minds of would-be terrorists around the world. As part of its "Shared Values" initiative, the State Department is acting, after a fashion, as the international promoter of Native Deen, a rap trio based in Washington, D.C.

Deen is Arabic for "religion." Though the members of the band—Joshua Salaam, Naeem Muhammad, and Abdul-Malik Ahmad—are African-Americans, not Arabs, the native religion in question is Islam. (As they rap in the song "Soldiers," "Some come from far-off lands like Iran and Pakistan / But some are just like you and I / Brought up on corn bread, collard greens, and sweet-potato pie.") Native Deen doesn't rap about bitches and ho's, or make music videos. Because some radical interpretations of Islam equate musical instruments with sex and alcohol, even turntables are off limits; the group uses only "traditional drums"—conga and tabla—and the occasional human beat box. Native Deen performs in Islamic casual: white *kufis*, or skullcaps; black shalwars over baggy white pants; and black shoes. Their hit songs, spread largely by word of mouth along the Muhammadan wedding and convention circuit, include "M-U-S-L-I-M," "I Only Fear Allah," and "Drug Free."

"After 9/11, the question of how well we are understood overseas was thrown into high relief," an official in the International Information Programs office at the State Department said last week. The information office has published an article about Native Deen for its "Muslim Life in America" series; the story, posted on the State Department Web site, describes the group's message as "decidedly more upbeat than the dark themes of drugs and violence that permeate most rap," and quotes the band member Joshua Salaam as saying, "Our music is American, it's hip, and it's something everybody can be comfortable with." Courtesy of the State Department, media from Kazakhstan and Malaysia have come to the United States and produced stories on the trio as well. "We're showing people that Islam doesn't exist only in the East," the rapper Naeem Muhammad says.

The band was in town recently for a tuneup concert—a celebration of Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan, at the Muslim Youth Center, in Bath Beach, Brooklyn—before embarking on a five-city tour of England. About three hundred and fifty people—largely preteen Arabs—filled the gold-cushioned chairs, which were arranged neatly beneath a mammoth chandelier in the center's third-floor ballroom. The boys were dressed, for the most part, in standard hip-hop concertgoing uniform: DKNY sweatshirts, North Face jackets, Atlanta Falcons jerseys. The girls wore head scarves.

It was the third time Native Deen had played New York, and the audience was familiar enough with the group's repertoire to sing along: "Ramadan is here / The Blessed month of the year / Fasting and not eating food / Acting nice and not rude / Instead of watching movies today / Let's go to the Masjid and pray."

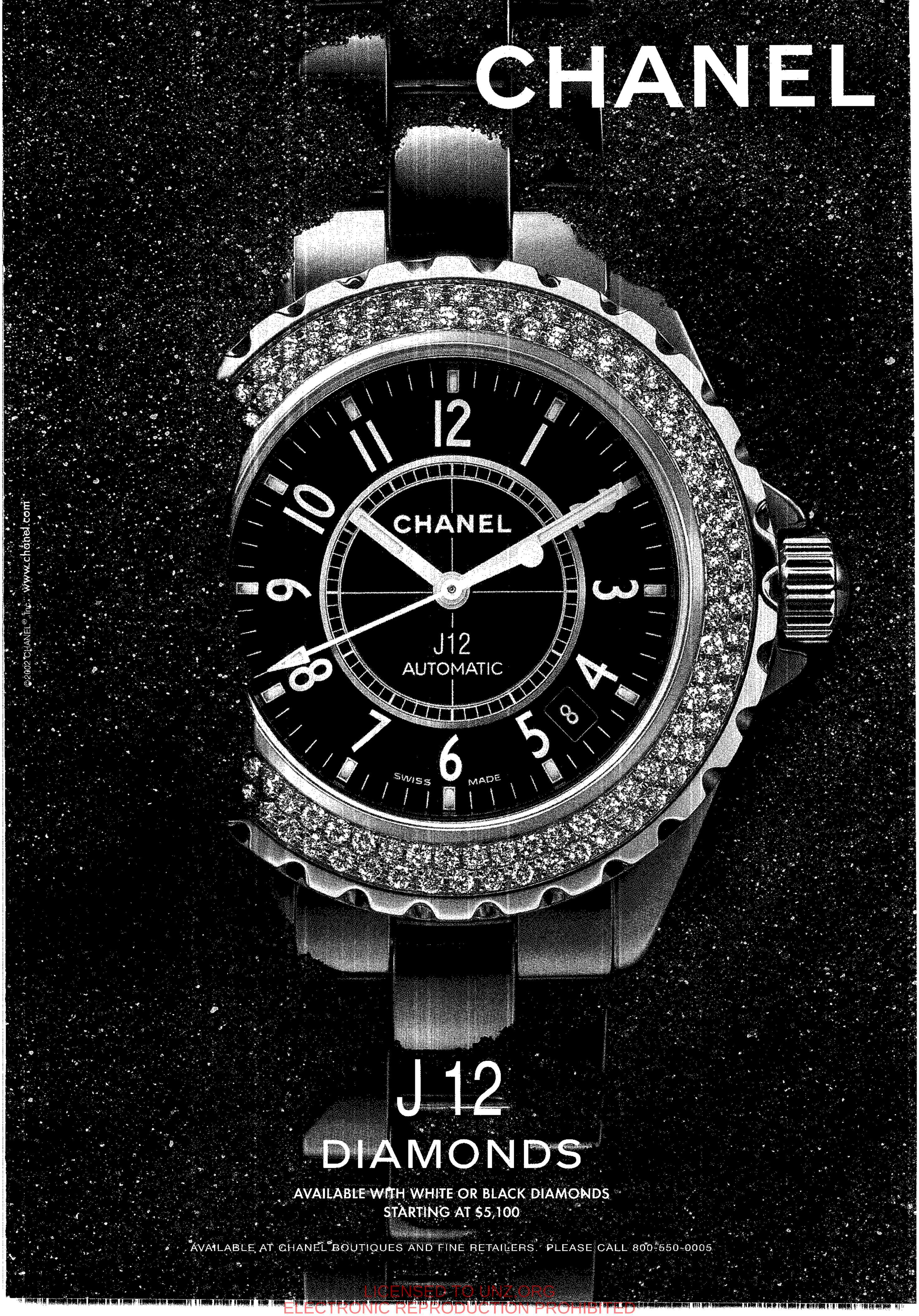


Native Deen

Near the end of the first set, Salaam jumped from the stage and shouted, "It's time for 'Hell Fire'!" The lights dimmed, smoke shot up through the stage floor, and a boy in the audience shouted, "Gangsta!"

"No, it's not gangsta," Salaam called back. "You in the wrong show."

Between songs, the kids in the front rows shouted requests. Salaam silenced them. "You guys need to listen. I'm a go like a teacher on you," he said. "Where's my yardstick?" He checked his Palm Pilot, and explained that the song order was predetermined. "We're going to slow it down a bit. These next two songs we think have deep meanings. . . . Then we're going to end with 'Drug Free' and 'M-U-S-L-I-M,' so we can end on a real high note." The show closed with the audience shouting along, "Always be proud, you can say it out loud / I am proud to be down with the Muslim crowd!"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Backstage after the gig, Salaam talked about Native Deen's continuing popularity in the capital. "The State Department called us again, and they have somebody who's interested in taking us overseas to someplace where there's an American Ambassador, because they saw that we're touring the U.K., and they think this would be a good presentation of Muslims in America, to show that—well, maybe it's a little political—Muslims are living well in America."

Salaam and Muhammad discussed their musical influences, which range from the Beatles to Cat Stevens (a.k.a. Yusuf Islam) and Michael Jackson, and on up to more or less contemporary hip-hop acts such as De La Soul, Mos Def (who happens to be Muslim), and even Eminem. "He has skills. Anybody in the rap world knows that he's a very good lyricist," Salaam said.

"He's definitely taking the rap world by storm," Muhammad said. "But what we have a problem with is the subject matter, the content, the image, you know."

Soon afterward, they went downstairs to pray.

—*Ben McGrath*

SAY CHEESE DEPT.
CHINESE WEDDING

Right now the most likely place in New York City to see a young Chinese woman in a wedding dress—her lips painted the shiny red of a toy fire engine, her shoulders bare and quivering in the cold—is Central Park. This is the Chinese-American wedding season. By the Chinese calendar, only certain days are favorable for weddings. Which ones are congenial for a particular couple are determined by the days the bride and the groom were born, and the hours of their births. The Chinese in Chinatown call pure-blood Chinese born in America "ABC's"—American-born Chinese. They tend to get married on Fridays or Saturdays. First-generation immigrants, whom the Chinese call Newcomers, tend to get married on Sundays, Mondays, or Tuesdays. Many of them work six days a week in restaurants, and they use their day off to get married. The most popular wedding days are Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's.

Approximately two hundred wedding photographers work in Chinatown. Nearly all of them spend part of the day with the bride and groom in Central Park, usually at the sailboat pond, the Bethesda Fountain, and Belvedere Castle. (Couples who live in Brooklyn or Queens or New Jersey sometimes prefer being photographed closer to their homes. In such cases, the photographers go to Grand Army Plaza, Prospect Park, or Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, in Queens, or Liberty State Park, in New Jersey, which can be very cold if the wind is coming off the river. Couples in Queens who can afford a bigger budget sometimes like to go to the botanic garden, which charges admission.) A photo session in Manhattan also includes a visit, usually at the end of the day, to a pier on the Brooklyn side of the Brooklyn Bridge, so that the photographer can take a picture of the couple with the Manhattan skyline in the background. On a busy day, it is not uncommon to see brides in these places backed up like golfers waiting for a tee.

Typically, the bride and groom arrive at the photographer's studio in Chinatown at around nine in the morning. They change into their wedding clothes, and the bride puts on her makeup. Around eleven-thirty, they and their party and the photographer drive up to the Park in a limousine, which lets them out at Fifth Avenue and Seventy-second Street. The other day, it was about forty-five degrees when a young Chinese woman and her fiancé arrived in the Park. They work at the same restaurant, and they were being married that evening on Mott Street. They were having their portraits taken by a photographer from the Faga Wedding Studio, on East Broadway. The bride wore a brown canvas jacket over her gown. With a best man and a bridesmaid and four friends, the couple walked down the hill toward the pond. Along the way, the photographer stopped them and told the bride that he was very sorry, but the time had come for her to take off her coat. The straps of her gown were about the width of a strand of ribbon on the wrapping of a Christmas package. The photographer had the couple stand on the pavement beside the water. To show the bride how he wanted her to pose, he stood with one foot forward and held her bouquet above his head like a torch. The bouquet pointed at the windows of apartments on Fifth Avenue. In one of them, a woman in a dark-red dress stood looking down at the Park. The sky was pale blue, and there were thin shadows of tree branches on the pavement.

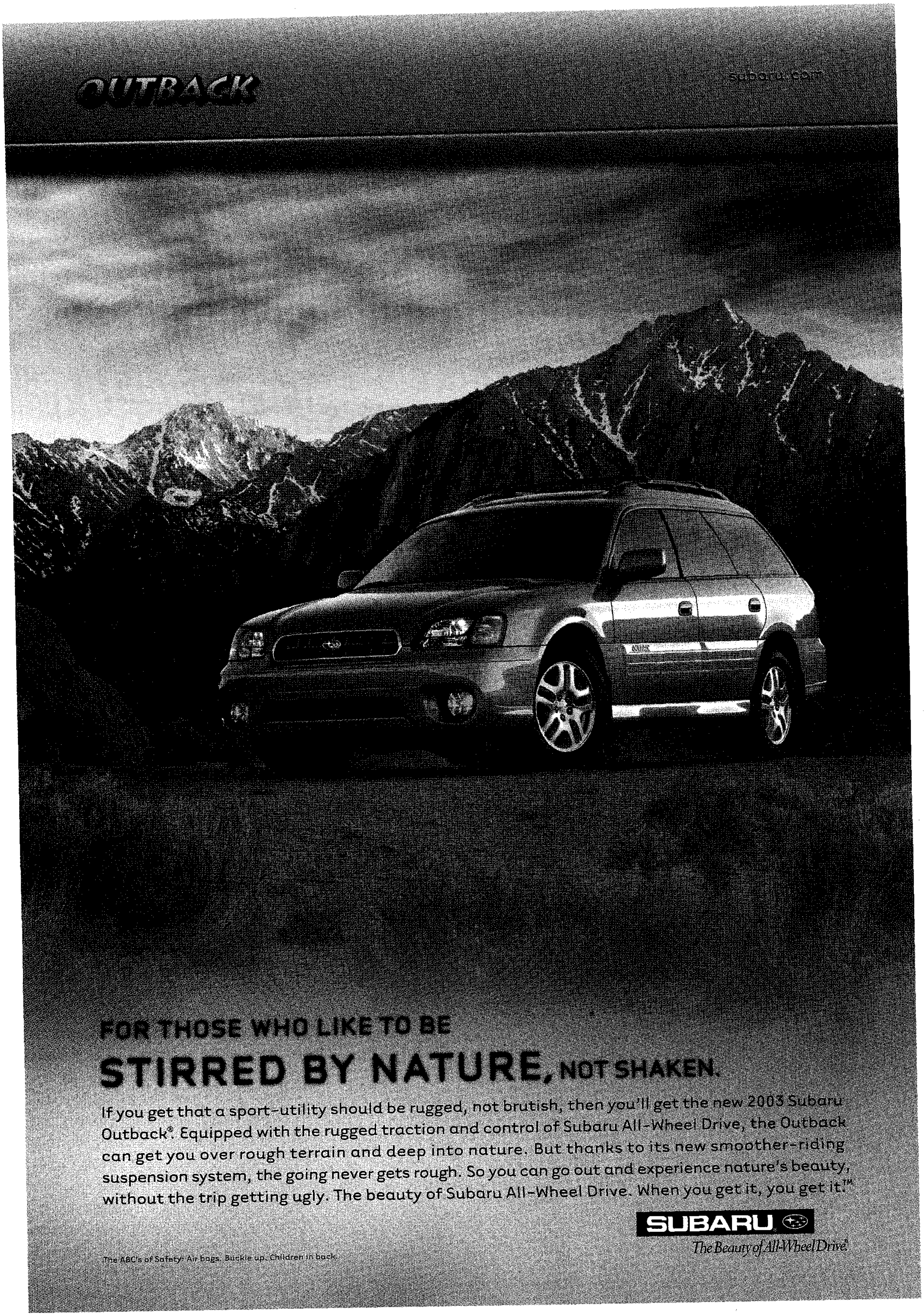
The bride's hair was piled on top of her head, and there were little red silk roses worked into it. She wore long white gloves that had white bows at the wrist and along her forearms. When she raised her train to walk, she exposed her legs—she was wearing bluejeans and big rubber-soled shoes. While she posed, the petals in her bouquet trembled, as if getting married took all the nerve she could gather.

From the pavement, the photographer moved the couple to the concrete bank of the pond. They sat beside each other and looked at an old man prodding a model ship with a tree branch. The ship had been made from two-by-fours and was stalled among the leaves and some ducks that weren't going anywhere, either. To move the bride's chin, the photographer put his fingers on her cheeks. Then he spread crumbs from a doughnut to gather a flock of pigeons. Following the crumbs, the pigeons strutted to the hem of the bride's train. Her expression changed only twice. Once, when the photographer said something that sounded like "Chindew, hindew," she smiled. The second time, her mouth fell open and her eyes widened when the photographer stamped his feet and the pigeons took flight, their wingbeats sounding like shuffling cards.

—*Alec Wilkinson*

MOM AND POP DEPT.
THE HUNDRED CLUB

Fanelli's Café, at the southwest corner of Prince and Mercer Streets, is probably the second- or third- or fourth-oldest drinking-and-eating establishment in New York. It opened for business in eighteen-something-or-other—with a different name (or, more likely, with no name at all), and in a somewhat different form—and has been providing Manhattanites with alcohol and food in



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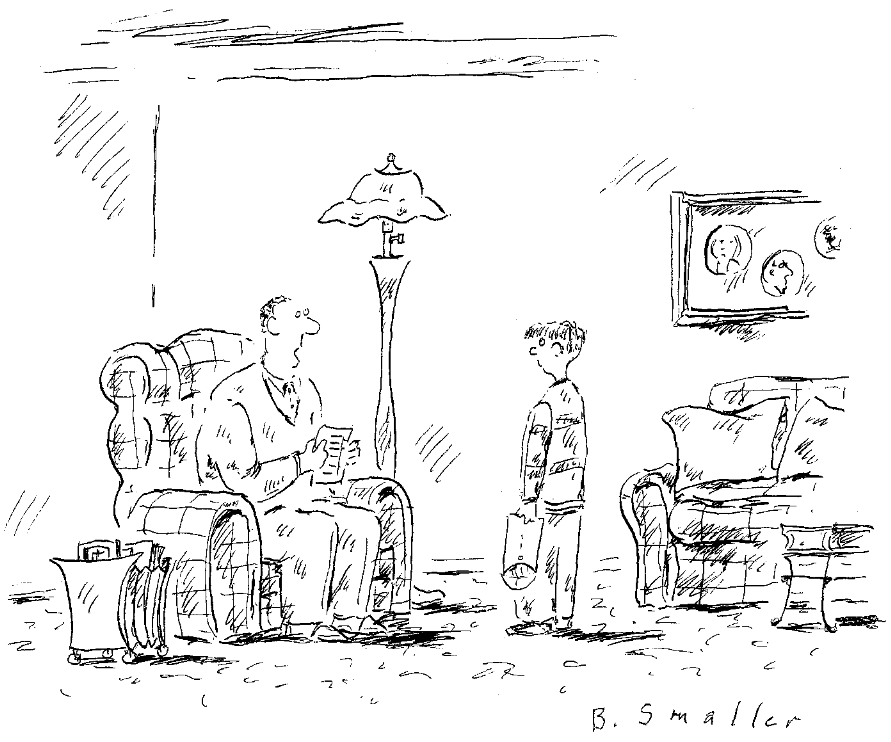
varying ratios ever since. It acquired its current name from Michael Fanelli, a retired boxer, who ran the place from the early nineteen-twenties until the early nineteen-eighties. A cupboard behind the bar leads to a secret room, where Fanelli, during Prohibition, stashed illegal booze, some of which had been distilled on the premises. If you ask to see the secret room today, the current owner, whose name is Noë, will say no.

A darkly inviting painting of the exterior of Fanelli's is reproduced in miniature on the cover of "The Historic Shops & Restaurants of New York: A Guide to Century-Old Establishments in the City," a new book by Ellen Williams and Steve Radlauer. The book is filled with the sorts of facts that make New York such a challenging city to take for granted: the salesmen at Brooks Brothers addressed J. P. Morgan throughout his life as Jack; Salvador Dali bought leeches (for use as models) at J. Leon Lascoff & Son Apothecary, on Lexington Avenue, which has been open since 1899; Jay Vanderbilt, Joseph Pulitzer, Helen Keller, and Sammy Davis, Jr., all shopped at Mager & Gougelman, on East Thirty-seventh, for artificial eyes.

One recent Monday evening, representatives of some forty century-old establishments gathered at Fanelli's to celebrate the book's publication. Most of the guests wore nametags, and many sipped historically appropriate cocktails, called gin daisies. Herbert Weitz, a second-generation rare-book dealer and bookbinder, invited the other guests to autograph their entries in his copy of the book, and served as an unofficial facilitator and matchmaker. "Hey, Floor Coverings!" he hollered at one point, to two sisters who run a hundred-and-thirty-five-year-old flooring business called Aronson's. "Have you met Wholesale Marble?"

Many of the city's oldest businesses were founded by Italians or Eastern European Jews who arrived here shortly before the turn of the twentieth century; subsisted at first by peddling merchandise from pushcarts or horse-drawn wagons; eventually saved enough money to acquire storefronts; and passed their growing businesses to their children. "It's always the same story," Mark Federman, the third-generation proprietor of Russ & Daughters, a fish specialty store on Houston Street, said. "The only difference is that the Italians talk like this"—hands moving up and down. "And the Jews talk like this"—hands moving side to side. Federman practiced law for a decade, but as his parents approached retirement he realized that he couldn't bear to let their business close. He took over in 1978, and is now hoping to hand the store down to his twenty-five-year-old daughter and her cousin, both of whom were pursuing careers far outside the fish business before September 11, 2001, when they independently decided that the thing they cared most about was family. Federman smiled in their direction. "They get it," he said.

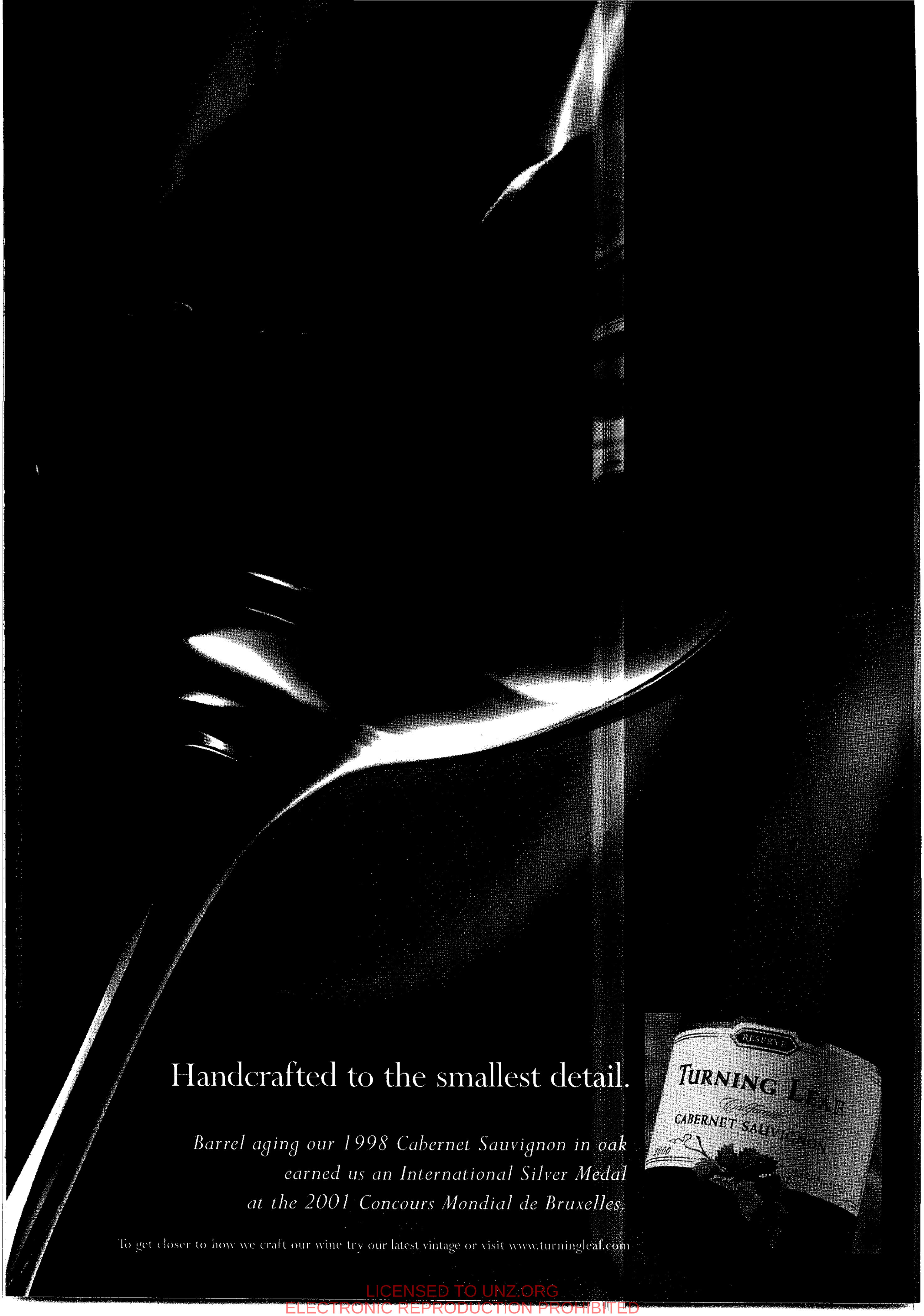


"They may be your grades, but they're the return on my investment."

The hands-moving-up-and-down version of this story was told by Lou DiPalo, who runs DiPalo Dairy, a fourth-generation cheese and specialty-foods shop on Grand Street. He is fifty-one years old and likes to say that he has worked behind the counter at DiPalo's for fifty-two years. (His mother stayed at her post at the cash register until shortly before giving birth to him.) He has always worked in the store, though he did moonlight for several years as a licensed real-estate broker. "I made a ton of money in real estate, but I was never happy, so I quit," he said. DiPalo hopes that his son, who is twenty years old, will want to take his place someday. "We talk about it," DiPalo said. "I take him to Italy with me when we're shopping. I show him how to select the cheese, I show him how to select olive oil, and he does those things well. But when I say, 'Sam, you've got to be here at nine o'clock,' he'll show up at ten-thirty. So we've got some things to work on."

The city's oldest business that is still run by its founding family and still situated at its original address is probably Garber Hardware, on Eighth Avenue between Jane and Horatio Streets. It was founded in 1884 by Joseph Garber, a Russian Jew, whose initial inventory consisted solely of ingredients for paint. As the store descended through the generations, it expanded into neighboring properties and dramatically broadened its offerings. "I'd say the biggest thing we offer today is advice," Nathaniel Garber Schoen, who is twenty-five years old and is a grandson of one of Joseph Garber's grandsons, said. "People buy something at Ikea, then can't figure out what to do with it. They don't want to make a horrible mess putting it together, so they come and talk to us." Nathaniel has an art degree, and he still thinks of himself as an artist—one of the store's front windows features a shifting selection of his work—but he has always known that he would be unable to disentangle his personal destiny from that of the family business. "I grew up in the store, and I love it," he said. "I wasn't going to be the one to make it go away."

—*David Owen*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THE FINANCIAL PAGE
THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

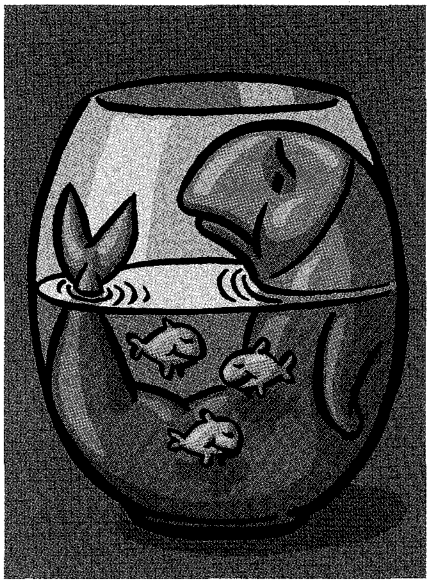
In the perfect world of economic theory, corporations are impersonal machines, adjusting supply quickly in response to demand. In the real world, though, corporations are fickle institutions, run by individuals who are prone to bouts of giddiness and fear. Despite some evidence indicating otherwise, C.E.O.s are people, too.

Consider two contrary interpretations of the country's economy. The first comes from a recent survey, conducted by Fleet Capital, of six hundred and seventy-three chief financial officers at midsized manufacturing companies across the United States. (Midsized means that these companies have sales of between twenty-five million and a billion dollars.) Manufacturing was hit especially hard by last year's recession, and has been stagnant for most of this year. But the C.F.O.s said that they were upbeat about their own companies' prospects, confident that the economy will grow briskly next year, and convinced that the days of cost-cutting and retrenchment will soon be over.

The chief executive officers of America's biggest companies see it differently. Their vision of the near future is one of almost unrelieved pessimism. A recent survey of the members of the Business Roundtable, which comprises the C.E.O.s of a hundred and fifty of the nation's biggest companies, found that two-thirds of these C.E.O.s expect the economy to grow by less than two per cent in 2003—in other words, less than it grew this year. Sixty per cent of the C.E.O.s plan to cut payrolls, and only nineteen per cent intend to increase spending. John Trani, the C.E.O. of Stanley Works, summed up the mood among his peers when he said recently, "The industrial side is, in certain markets, [in] a depression."

The disparity recalls the early days of the Vietnam War, when many officers in the field reported that the war was being lost, while the generals at headquarters kept maintaining that it was being won. In this case, however, the opposite holds true: the officers in the field see light at the end of the tunnel, while the top brass smells defeat. So why are the C.F.O.s so much more sanguine than the C.E.O.s?

Part of it is that the big-company C.E.O.s are unnerved by the post-Enron backlash and by the damage done to their reputations and their stock. The hothouse atmosphere makes it harder for them to block out the public discourse and focus on what their customers and suppliers are telling them—to concentrate, in other words, on what's really going on in their businesses. "With smaller, more focussed companies, you may have a better feel for what's happening on the ground in your business sector," James Connolly, the president of Fleet Capital, said last week. "With Fortune 100 companies, you may be more likely to default to the macroeconomic consensus view."


CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

The fact that your former golf partners are under indictment or that your stock is in a slump shouldn't necessarily determine whether you build a new factory or invest in a new product. But it's hard for it not to. The stock market has an insidious effect on C.E.O.s' moods, because of its impact not just on their companies but on their own bank accounts. Something like eighty per cent of total C.E.O. compensation is now tied to a company's stock price, and last year, according to *Business Week*, the average C.E.O. of a public company saw his pay pared by $15.4 million. That'll make a guy think twice about a lot of things.

What's more, big-company C.E.O.s now spend so much time talking to each other that their pessimism spreads. Studies have shown that group discussion often makes people adopt more extreme positions. So perhaps it's not surprising that when around seventy of the leading C.E.O.s in America got together two months ago at the Greenbrier resort, in West Virginia, for closed-door discussions about the state of the economy, they came away convinced that it was tanking.

Meanwhile, because of the way corporations set their budgets, it's hard for C.E.O.s to get the right information from the front lines. Corporations typically base bonuses on achieving performance goals. The easiest way to meet those goals, particularly in an uncertain economy, is to lowball predictions for the year ahead. Even if demand seems to be picking up, managers have little incentive to convey that information up the corporate ladder. The more steps there are on that ladder the harder it is to discern what's really happening on the ground. And though it may seem reasonable to assume that C.E.O.s are more prescient than most mortals—how else did they get to the top?—their recent track record does not inspire confidence. Three years ago, these same C.E.O.s were telling us that boom times were here to stay.

The danger is that even if the C.F.O.s are right and recovery is nigh, the trepidation of the big C.E.O.s could forestall it. To some extent, this has already happened. The blame for the economy's continuing sluggishness may best be laid not on consumers, who haven't stopped shopping, but on the C.E.O.s, who have. Big companies just aren't hiring or spending. As Jack Welch put it at a conference a month ago, "There's too much hunkering down."

Hunkering down is an understandable psychological response to crisis. But as a business strategy it is not a winner. The companies that have done the best over the past two years—such as Dell Computer and Amazon—are the ones that have been aggressive rather than cautious. Investors still expect businesses to increase profits at a brisk pace. Cost-cutting alone won't allow them to do that. Big-company C.E.O.s got themselves, and the rest of us, into this mess. Now let's see if they can get us out.

—*James Surowiecki*

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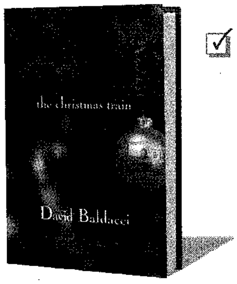
Something for Everyone on Your List

☑ Secret Santa at the office

THE CHRISTMAS TRAIN
by David Baldacci

a e L


the christmas train
David Baldacci

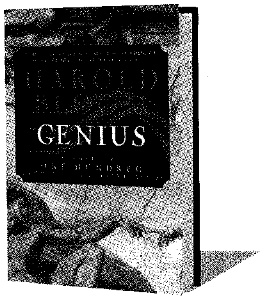
☑ Teacher with a heart of gold

PEACE ANGELS
by Antoinette Sampson

Peace
Angels

☑ Doorman with a degree in literature

GENIUS
by Harold Bloom


HAROLD BLOOM
GENIUS

☑ Could-be-better-with-money mom

RICH DAD'S PROPHECY
by Robert T. Kiyosaki
with Sharon L. Lechter, C.P.A.

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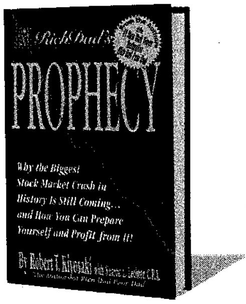
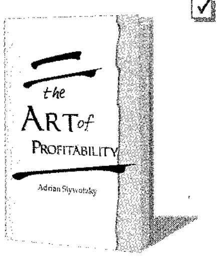

Rich Dad's
PROPHECY
Why the Biggest Stock Market Crash in History Is Still Coming... and How You Can Prepare Yourself and Profit from It!
By Robert T. Kiyosaki with Sharon L. Lechter C.P.A.

☑ Finance-fixated friend

THE ART OF PROFITABILITY
by Adrian Slywotzky


the
ART of
PROFITABILITY
Adrian Slywotzky

☑ Deep-down romantic dad

NIGHTS IN RODANTHE
by Nicholas Sparks

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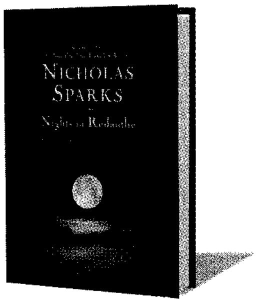
NICHOLAS SPARKS
Nights in Rodanthe

☑ Can't-boil-water Italian boyfriend

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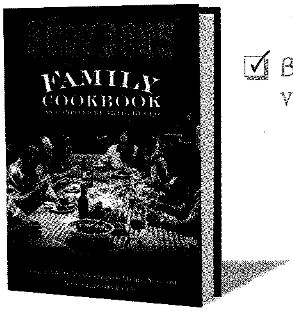
Written by Allen Rucker
with Recipes by Michele Scicolone
Series Created by David Chase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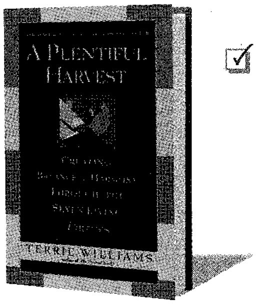
COOKBOOK

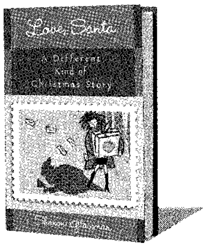
☑ Beacon-of-virtue big sis

A PLENTIFUL HARVEST
by Terrie Williams


A PLENTIFUL HARVEST
TERRIE WILLIAMS

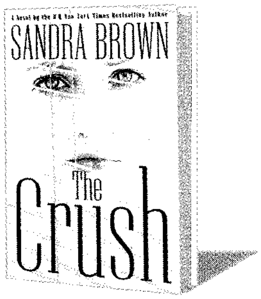
☑ Believes-in-Santa baby-sitter

LOVE, SANTA
by Sharon Glassman


Love, Santa
A Different Kind of Christmas Story

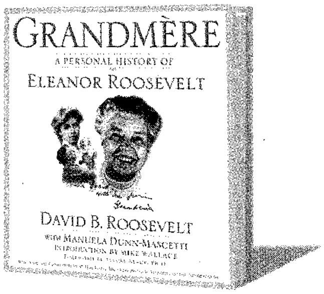
☑ Mystery-loving neighbor

THE CRUSH
by Sandra Brown


SANDRA BROWN
The Crush

☑ Roosevelt-revering aunt

GRANDMÈRE
by David B. Roosevelt
with Manuela Dunn-Mascetti


GRANDMÈRE
A PERSONAL HISTORY OF
ELEANOR ROOSEVELT
DAVID B. ROOSEVELT
WITH MANUELA DUNN-MASCETTI

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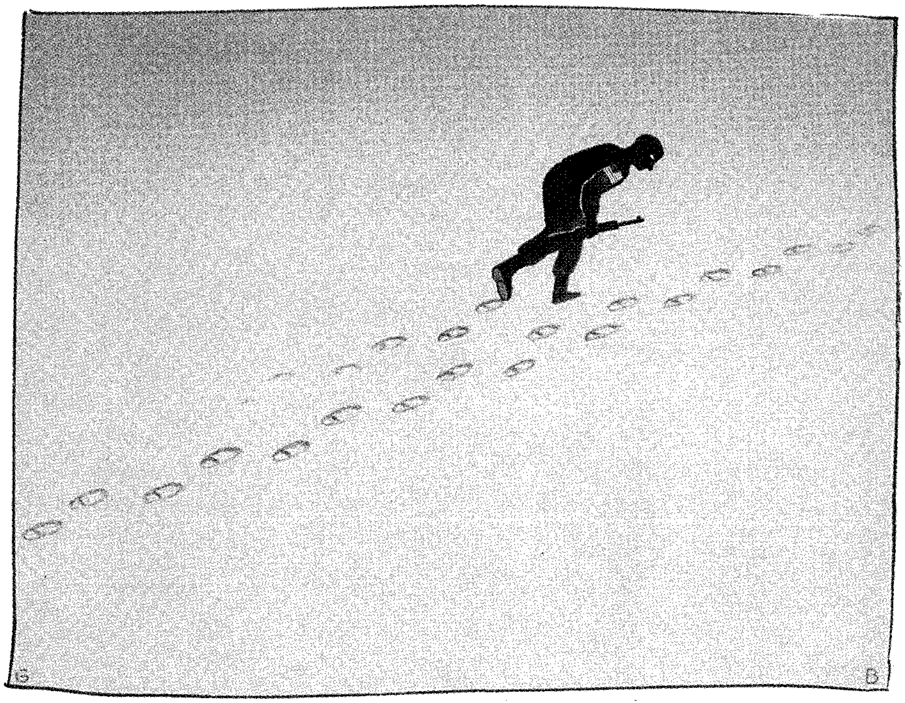
ANNALS OF NATIONAL SECURITY

MANHUNT

The Bush Administration's new strategy in the war against terrorism.

BY SEYMOUR M. HERSH

Sometime on Sunday, November 3rd, an unmanned American Predator reconnaissance aircraft, flying out of a base in Djibouti, fired a Hellfire missile at an automobile in Yemen that was believed to be carrying an Al Qaeda leader named Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi. A joint American and Yemeni intelligence team had been tracking al-Harethi, and the order to fire was not given until the car was isolated, far from any other traffic—and from any witnesses—as it sped through a vast tract of desert in Marib province. Al-Harethi was in the car, along with five other men. All of them were killed.



The Pentagon is no longer trying to "avoid the gray area," one former planner said.

The operation entailed a high level of technical coöperation and trust between the Americans and the Yemenis. The joint intelligence team, working out of a situation room in Yemen—a Yemeni official would say only that the site was not visible from the air—had been tracing al-Harethi's satellite telephone calls for weeks. Al-Harethi clearly was aware of the danger and frequently changed telephones and numbers; five cell phones were found on his body. Yemeni security officials arrived at the scene shortly after the blast—a helicopter had been standing by—and removed the bombed-out car. They took the bodies to a military hospital in Sanaa, Yemen's capital, where American officials collected DNA samples for processing at a military laboratory in the United States.

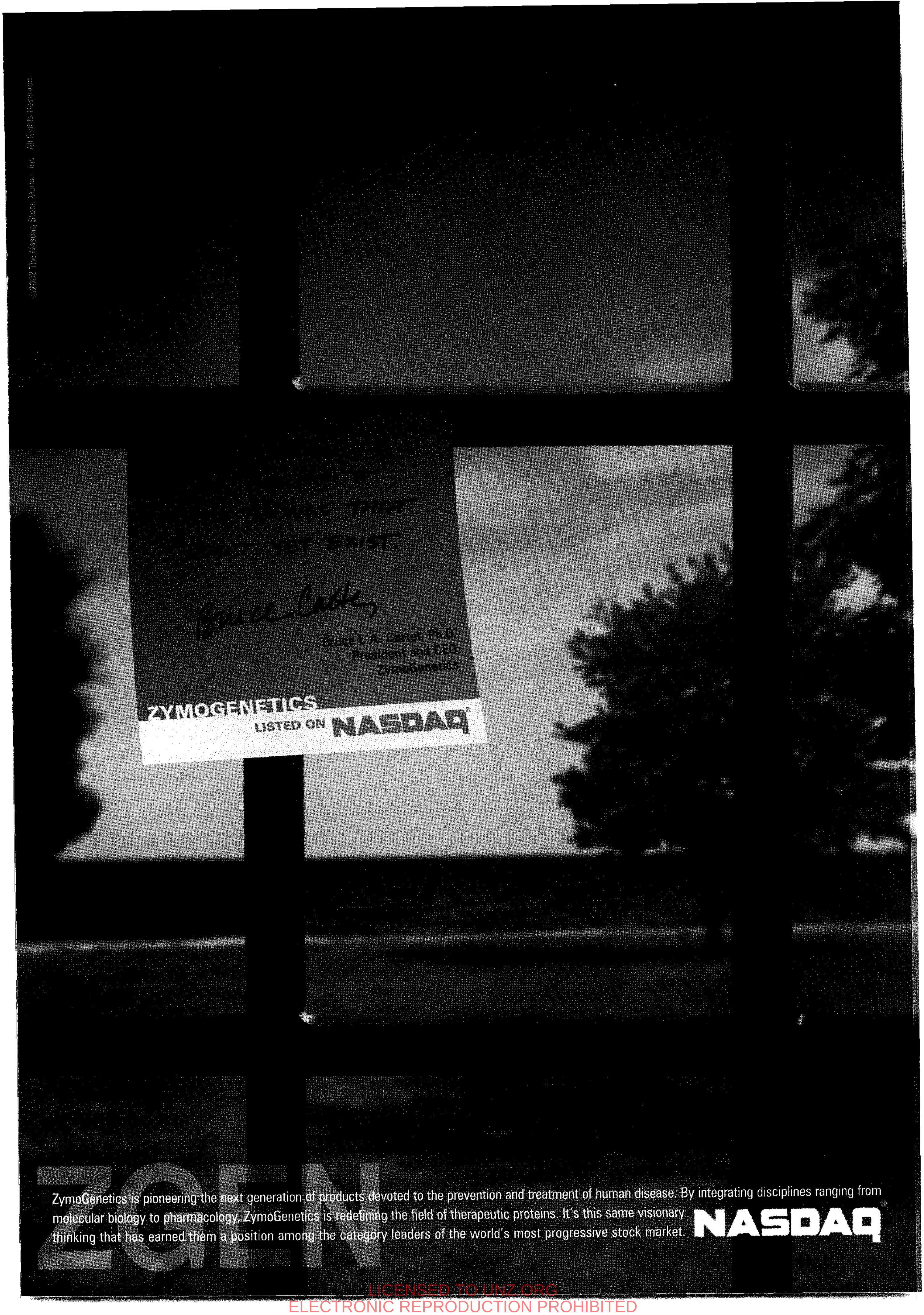
By the next day, Bush Administration officials had begun informing journalists that the Predator had made its first Al Qaeda kill outside Afghanistan. Some journalists were also told that al-Harethi, long sought for a role in the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole in Aden harbor, in the fall of 2000, was on a list of "high-value" targets whose elimination, by capture or death, had been called for by President Bush. (A Defense Department consultant told me that, as of this fall, seven high-value Al Qaeda targets—"top guys that they're really after"—have been designated for elimination by the Bush Administration. According to the Yemeni official, there are still two high-value targets in Yemen.)

The Hellfire was meant for al-Harethi, but, Yemeni and American officials told reporters, the five passengers in the car had terrorist ties as well. Four of them belonged to the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, an outlawed terrorist sect that had links to Al Qaeda, and the fifth had been identified as Kamal Derwish, an Arab-American who grew up near Buffalo and, according to the F.B.I., recruited American Muslims to attend Al Qaeda training camps. There is no indication that American or Yemeni officials knew in advance who was in the car with al-Harethi. The Yemeni official told me that there was no thought of blockading the highway and attempting to capture al-Harethi and his passengers, because he had evaded earlier attempts and because "it was suspected that they were going to a target." The official said, "From past experience, this was the most effective way."

The intelligence about al-Harethi that day had been superb. The Yemeni official told me, however, that earlier there had been two intelligence "mistakes" that almost resulted in targeting innocent Bedouins. In one case, the joint-intelligence center found a group of Bedouins whose armed pickup trucks—pickups are the main mode of travel in the desert—included at least one vehicle that was mounted with a heavy machine gun. The Americans were about to hit the truck with a Predator, the Yemeni official said, "but we had someone tracking it, too. He was asked by phone, 'Who are those people?' He said, 'Bedouins. Not Al Qaeda.'"

The Yemeni official also said that the al-Harethi operation had produced valuable diplomatic information. For example, the car bearing al-Harethi and his colleagues had Saudi plates, which led investigators to believe that al-Harethi had been shuttling back and forth along Yemen's border with Saudi Arabia. According to the official, al-Harethi had obtained operating funds from Saudis. Apparently, they weren't the only suppliers of cash for the terrorists. Al-Harethi's last known satellite telephone call, an

GUY BILLOUT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hour before the Predator struck, was to a number in the United Arab Emirates, an American ally that is also known to be a center of support for Muslim extremists. "Lots of money comes from the U.A.E.," the Yemeni official said.

The killing of al-Harethi represented a dividend in the drive to track down suspected Al Qaeda terrorists who have fled Afghanistan and moved to Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, and other countries, a goal that has preoccupied American intelligence since the fall of the Taliban. Administration officials praised the Predator attack for its precision and effective use of on-the-spot intelligence. "We've just got to keep the pressure on everywhere we're able to and we've got to deny the sanctuaries," Paul D. Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, told CNN. The Hellfire strike, he added, was "a very successful tactical operation."

The al-Harethi operation also marked a dramatic escalation of the American war on terrorism. For more than a generation, state-endorsed assassination has been anathema in the United States. In 1975, after revelations of C.I.A. efforts in the nineteen-sixties to kill Fidel Castro and other hostile foreign leaders, a Senate committee led by Frank Church concluded that such plotting "violates moral precepts fundamental to our way of life. . . . We reject absolutely any notion that the United States should justify its actions by the standards of totalitarians. . . . Of course, we must defend our democracy. But in defending it, we must resist undermining the very virtues we are defending." In 1976, President Gerald Ford signed an executive order banning political assassination, and that order remains in force.

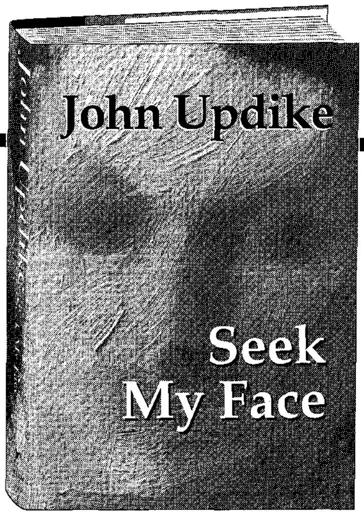
In the aftermath of September 11th, however, the targeting and killing of individual Al Qaeda members without juridical process has come to be seen within the Bush Administration as justifiable military action in a new kind of war, involving international terrorist organizations and unstable states. Defense Department lawyers have concluded that the killing of selected individuals would not be illegal under the Army's *Law of War* if the targets were "combatant forces of another nation, a guerrilla force, or a terrorist or other organization whose actions pose a threat to the security of the United States."

On July 22nd, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld issued a secret directive ordering Air Force General Charles Holland, the four-star commander of Special Operations, "to develop a plan to find and deal with members of terrorist organizations." He added, "The objective is to capture terrorists for interrogation or, if necessary, to kill them, not simply to arrest them in a law-enforcement exercise." The manhunt would be global in its reach, Rumsfeld wrote, and Holland was to cut through the Pentagon bureaucracy and process deployment orders "in minutes and hours, not days and weeks."

When I asked Rumsfeld's office for comment, I was referred to a December 3rd press briefing in which the Defense Secretary had been questioned about the Pentagon's policy on the use of the Predator "to assassinate or to kill an Al Qaeda." Rumsfeld initially responded with a characteristic joke: "I'm working my way over to figuring out how I won't answer that." He then turned serious, and said that the policy "is what you all know it to be. There is really no mystery to it. We recruit, organize, train, equip, and deploy young men and women, in uniform, to go out and serve as members of our military. They are not trained to do the word you used"—assassinate—"which I won't even repeat. That is not what they're trained to do. They are trained to serve the country and to contribute to peace and stability in the world."

Nonetheless, many past and present military and intelligence officials have expressed alarm at the Pentagon policy about targeting Al Qaeda members. Their concerns have less to do with the legality of the program than with its wisdom, its ethics, and, ultimately, its efficacy. Some of the most heated criticism comes from within the Special Forces.

Rumsfeld began complaining to his deputies about General Holland's caution soon after September 11th. A few days after the attacks, he asked Holland to compile a list of terrorist targets for immediate retaliation. Holland returned two weeks later with four possible targets—suspected Islamic-fundamentalist redoubts in Somalia, Mauritania, the



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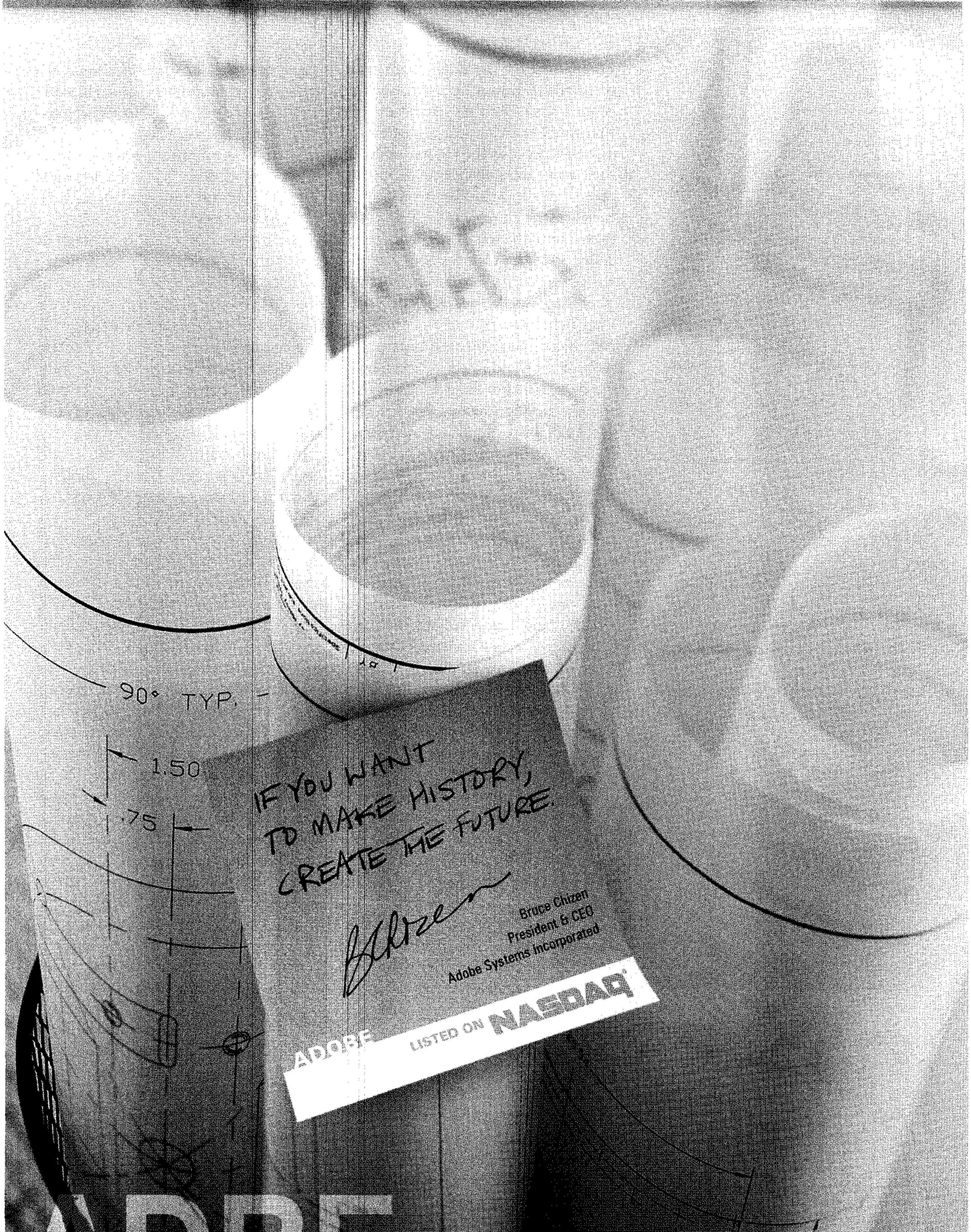
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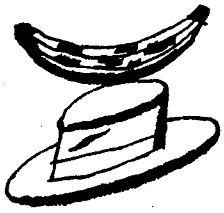
Philippines, and the Triple Frontier, the point where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet. But the General also told Rumsfeld that an immediate attack wasn't possible, because the military did not have "actionable intelligence" on the proposed targets, according to a defense consultant. The retaliation would have to wait until the war in Afghanistan got under way. The Defense Secretary was not pleased. In the following months, "actionable intelligence" became a derisive catchphrase among civilian Pentagon officials, and Rumsfeld and his aides spoke of Holland's case of "the Slows," the complaint President Lincoln made before relieving General George McClellan of his Union Army command.

Some senior officers attached to the Joint Chiefs of Staff have argued that Rumsfeld's plans would turn the military's most élite forces, the Special Operations Command—which includes the Navy's SEALs and the Army's Delta Force—and the United States government's secret undercover team, known as Gray Fox, into hunter-killer teams. Currently, these forces train heavily in a wide range of specialties, among them strategic reconnaissance, direct action, unconventional warfare, and psychological operations. (Units of Delta Force and Gray Fox are now deployed in the Gulf region.) Questions of turf are involved. A defense consultant who has maintained close ties to the Special Forces said, "There is concern that emphasis on a target list will turn the Special Operations Forces into a counter-terror force and atrophy other attributes."

"They want to turn these guys into assassins," a former high-level intelligence officer told me. "They want to go on rumors—not facts—and go for political effect, and that's what the Special Forces Command is really afraid of. Rummy is saying that politics is bigger than war, and we need to take guys out for political effect: 'You have to kill Goebbels to get to Hitler.' " With regard to Rumsfeld, he added, "The military is saying, 'Who is this guy?' There's a major clash of wills as to what is the future of Special Forces."



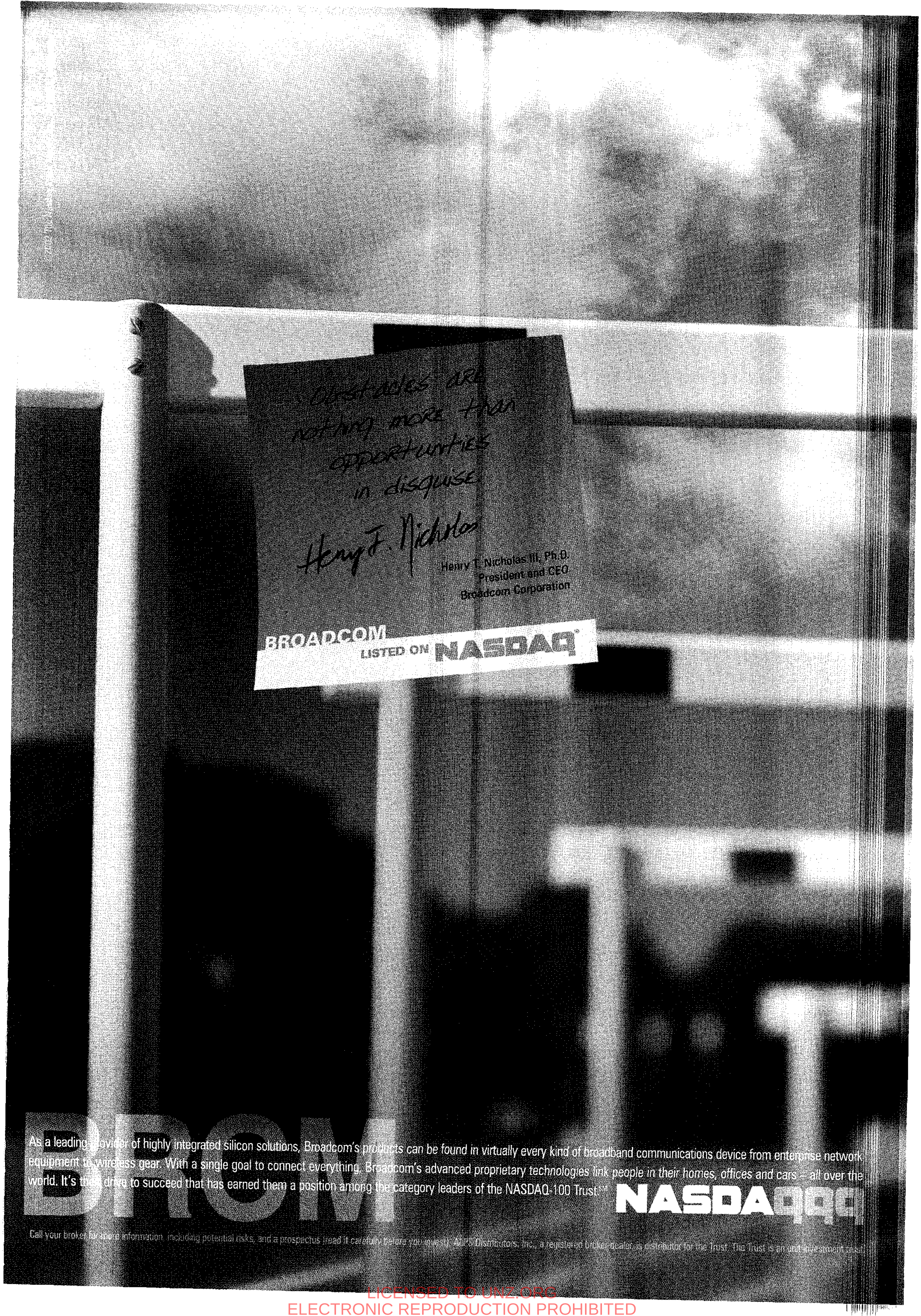
A senior Administration official acknowledged that Rumsfeld's plans for Special Operations run "counter to conventional military doctrine." He may succeed, nevertheless, the official said, because the senior military leadership suffers from a lack of will. The official noted that Rumsfeld was able to get what he wanted in large measure because he made it a personal issue. "He's the strangest guy I've ever run into," the official said. "He doesn't delegate."

Speaking to journalists in September about the uses of preëmptive military actions in Iraq and elsewhere, Rumsfeld said, "We all would like perfection; we'd like all the dots connected for us with a ribbon wrapped around it." Americans, he added, "want evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. You want to be able to be certain that you know before anyone's punished." But, he continued, "this isn't punishment. We've got the wrong model in our minds if we're thinking about punishment. We're not. This isn't retaliation or retribution."

In internal Defense Department memos, Rumsfeld and the civilian officials close to him laid out the case for a new approach to the war on terrorism, one that would rely, in part, on the killing of selected individuals. The documents reflect their skepticism toward the generals and admirals who run the armed forces. One paper noted, "The worst way to organize for the manhunt . . . is to have it planned in the Pentagon. . . . Our prerequisite of perfection for 'actionable intelligence' has paralyzed us." In another paper Rumsfeld was told, "We 'over-plan' for every contingency. . . . This denies us the agility and tactical surprise so necessary for manhunts, snatches, and retribution raids. We must be willing to accept the risks associated with a smaller footprint."

The paper urged the Secretary to "ensure that the military leadership understands fully the cultural change you seek." The manhunting teams must be kept "small and agile," the paper noted, and "must be able to operate clandestinely, using a full range of official and non-official cover arrangements to travel and to enter countries surreptitiously."

At a press conference in September, one journalist noted the military's growing involvement in police and intelligence activities inside Afghanistan, and asked Rumsfeld whether tracking down Al Qaeda was still the mission. "Well, a manhunt is certainly not what the armed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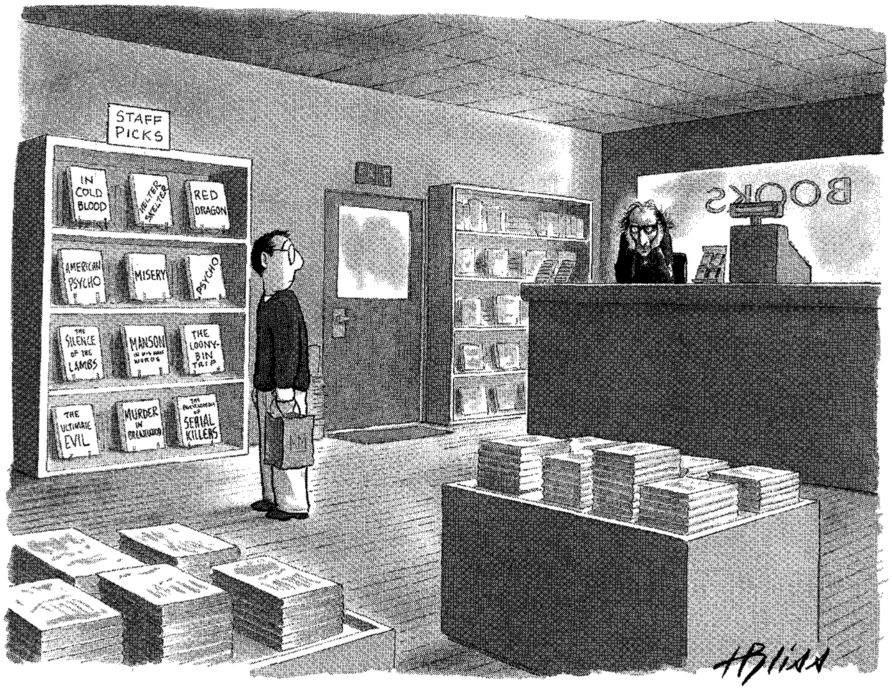

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forces of the United States are organized, trained, and equipped to do," Rumsfeld answered. "We may have to learn to do that, and we are indeed learning to do it." Paul Wolfowitz, in a discussion of future military operations during an interview with Bill Keller in the New York *Times Magazine*, in September, also noted obliquely that "maybe somewhere along the way we should have a volunteer force that is specifically volunteering for missions other than defending the country." Wolfowitz's idea was characterized by Keller as "the opposite of the Peace Corps, you might say."

The Hellfire attack in Yemen was applauded by many Americans, and also by the media, as progress in the war against terrorism. There were only a few public complaints. Anna Lindh, the Swedish foreign minister, declared that the American military attack, even with Yemeni approval, "is nevertheless a summary execution that violates human rights." She added, "Even terrorists must be treated according to international law. Otherwise, any country can start executing those whom they consider terrorists." Amnesty International also questioned "the deliberate killing of suspects in lieu of arrest, in circumstances in which they did not pose an immediate threat."

However, even American legal experts who were critical of the attacks did not challenge their legality. "It's not a question of law," Michael Glennon, a professor of international law at Tufts University, said. "It's a matter of policy. Is it wise? Do such attacks increase the possibility of retaliation at home and abroad on the American political and military leadership?" A similar point was made by Philip Heymann, a professor at Harvard Law School. "I don't think Richard Nixon signed the treaty outlawing biological warfare just because he had a deep aversion to biologicals," Heymann told me. "He signed it because it was against U.S. national interests to have a lot of little guys running around with biological agents that could not be deterred by our nuclear arsenal. Assassination is in the same ballpark—it doesn't take much to assassinate a U.S. Secretary of State or another Cabinet member." The American goal, he added, should be to outlaw "any weapon that even a small country can use against the big guys." Jeffrey H. Smith, a West Point graduate who served as the C.I.A.'s general counsel during the Clinton Administration, said, "I'm not opposed to shooting people, but it ought to be a last resort. If they're dead, they're not talking to you, and you create more martyrs."

Other military officials I spoke with had similar concerns. "You might be able to pull it off for five or six months," a Pentagon consultant said. "We've created a culture in the Special Forces—twenty- and twenty-one-year-olds who need adult leadership. They're assuming you've got legal authority, and they'll do it"—eagerly eliminate any target assigned to them. Eventually, the intelligence will be bad, he said, and innocent people will be killed. "And then they'll get hung." As for Rumsfeld and his deputies, he said, "These guys will overextend themselves, and they'll self-destruct."

A fatal mistake involving the Predator is known to have taken place at least once before, in Afghanistan. In February, C.I.A. officers and officers attached to the U.S. Central Command watched as a Predator, thousands of feet above ground, captured images of a very tall man being greeted effusively, or so it seemed, by a small group of colleagues. It was quickly agreed that the tall man could be Osama bin Laden, and a request was made through the chain of command to launch a Hellfire. Minutes went by before permission was granted. By then, the men on the ground had disbanded and, shortly afterward, the Predator captured what seemed to be the tall man and two others emerging from a wooded area. The Hellfire was launched, and devastated the area, killing three people—a terrible scene vividly depicted by the Predator's infrared cameras. Journalists later reported that the victims were three local men who had been scavenging in the woods for scrap metal.

One recently retired Special Forces operative, a colonel who served on high-level planning staffs at the Pentagon, warned that the civilians running the Pentagon are no longer trying to "avoid the gray area." He went on, "It is not unlawful, but ethics is about what we ought to do in our position as the most powerful country in human history. Strategic deception plans, global assassinations done by the military—all will define who we are and what we want to become as a nation. Unintended consequences are huge." He added, "The perception of a global vigilante force knocking off the enemies of the United States cannot be controlled by any strategic deception plan."

The military's previous experience with assassination programs suggests some of the difficulties involved. In the late nineteen-sixties, during the Vietnam War, American Special Forces units worked with the C.I.A. in what became known as the Phoenix Program. The program started small: targets believed to be working for the North—based on intelligence from informers—were culled, one by one, from South Vietnamese hamlets. By 1970, the program had mushroomed: more than eight thousand suspected Communist sympathizers were assassinated in that year alone. The military command began setting high quotas for targets to be eliminated or neutralized. Subsequent investigations determined that some of the victims had been put on target lists by South Vietnamese officials not because of their political beliefs but for personal reasons—to erase a gambling debt, for example, or to resolve a family quarrel. "The whole thing just kind of slid in one direction," Patrick McGarvey, a C.I.A. agent who had been involved in the program, explained to me in an interview in 1971. "I mean, you can't prove that anybody ever said, 'O.K., we're going to go out and start killing people,' because it just started happening." That year, Congress was told by William E. Colby, the C.I.A. official who ran the Phoenix Program (and later became the director of the C.I.A.), that the early days of the operation had been a "wild and unstable period and a lot of things were done that should not have been done."

A Pentagon adviser who worked closely with the Rumsfeld team vigorously defended its position, saying, "We have a peacetime military leadership that was Clintonized. And now we're in a war that it doesn't understand. What Rumsfeld wants them to do is to fight it differently, but his way makes most of our senior military leadership's understanding of war fighting irrelevant. He is saying to the military leadership, 'You don't have the answers,' and they don't want to hear that. The argument that Rumsfeld is mean to the chiefs and treats them poorly is, I think, a political operation to make him look like a hip shooter."

Rumsfeld's purpose in authorizing a high-value list of terrorists, the adviser said, is "obviously to go after the command structure of Al Qaeda." He went on, "Capture them? You would if you could. But suppose you had isolated an Al Qaeda group in the Bekaa Valley"—in Lebanon. "It would be hard to capture them." Taking them into custody would probably require ground forces and a major firefight; eliminating them, on the other hand, requires only a Hellfire missile. Referring to criticism of Rumsfeld's insistence on targeting individual Al Qaeda members, the adviser said, "I know you've been getting this from the Joint Staff. Some of the snake eaters in Special Forces are against it, too. Of course, I've heard this—'It's not American'—from the military leadership. But it's not because of legality. It's because they don't *want* to do it." He added, "The idea of *not* wanting to go after the senior leadership of a paramilitary group that has declared war on you is such a perversion that it's mind-boggling. The problem of a peacetime military is that they cannot conceive of doing what they are paid to do. 'Going after the leadership of Al Qaeda—that's a serious problem.' My God!"

Earlier this year, the adviser went on, Rumsfeld proposed that the Special Operations Command be made a "global command" and that it become the dominant agency for all military antiterrorist activities worldwide. Far from seizing the opportunity to be aggressive and "leaning forward," General Holland, the Special Operations commander, "didn't want to do it," the adviser said. He said that civilians in the Defense Department are now convinced that "there are few four-stars leaning forward in the Special Operations Command." The adviser added, "We'll have to have a dirty nuke go off to realize how serious this is." What's needed, he said, is a reassessment of all the senior generals and admirals who rose to the top during the Clinton Presidency. "We need to find some more fighting generals."

Rumsfeld, in addition to his conflicts with the military, began what amounted to a public fight with the C.I.A. this fall, over the agency's inability to document significant direct ties between Al Qaeda and Iraq. It was widely reported that Rumsfeld had set up an alternative intelligence-analysis shop under Douglas J. Feith, the Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy. Part of Feith's mission was to find evidence of a

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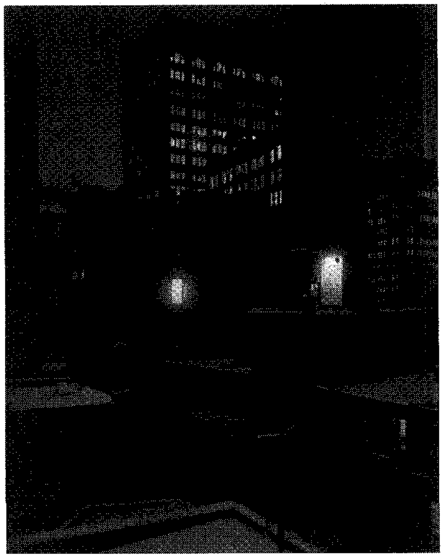

Stieglitz, Alfred (1864-1946) From the Window of 291. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949.

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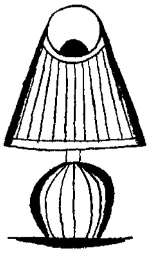
link between Al Qaeda and Iraq. Feith also oversees the vaguely named Office of Special Plans, which is directed by William J. Luti, and is the center of some of the most aggressive strategizing taking place in the Pentagon today.

"Feith and Luti see everybody not one hundred per cent with them as one hundred per cent against them—it's a very Manichaean world," a defense consultant said. A former high-level intelligence officer told me, "Rumsfeld's got to discredit the C.I.A.'s analyses to make his intelligence more reliable." Another former C.I.A. officer said that Rumsfeld "wants his own G.R.U."—a reference to the former Soviet military intelligence agency. "He does not want to be dependent on the C.I.A. for intelligence to prepare the battlefield for his troops."

One recommendation to Rumsfeld called for restructuring Special Operations as a specific agency under the personal command of the Defense Secretary. The new agency, which would have to be approved by Congress, would take orders only from the Secretary and thus, the memorandum to Rumsfeld said, overcome internal bureaucratic inertia "to implement the changes you want."

One of Rumsfeld's goals has been to give the Pentagon the capability to carry out the kind of clandestine operations that have traditionally been left to the C.I.A. Rumsfeld and his senior staff are known to be disenchanted with the C.I.A.'s director, George Tenet. The C.I.A., in turn, a former C.I.A. official said, is "very nervous about what's going on that they don't know about." In fact, he added, "They're absolutely terrified." (However, one Pentagon consultant told me, with regard to the C.I.A., that "George Tenet has tried to make that organization do more than it's capable of doing. At least he knows we're at war.")



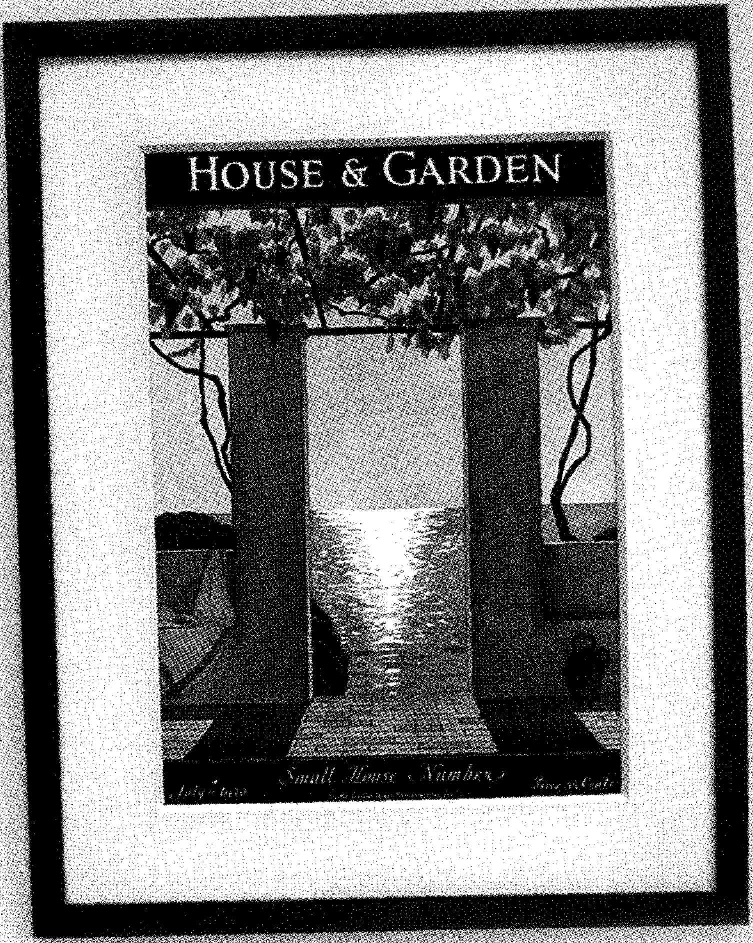
Internal Pentagon memorandums include scathing commentary on the intelligence community. In one, the Secretary was urged to keep the Gray Fox unit "out of the hands" of the intelligence community. The paper noted, "Alone, of all organizations within DoD, Gray Fox has the potential, if nurtured, to fight the kind of war the Secretary envisions fighting. . . . Let the intel people get their hooks into Gray Fox and intel will then control what operations can and cannot do."

Rumsfeld's ability to get his way both with the President, who has supported him, and within the defense establishment provokes awe inside the Pentagon. Commenting on Rumsfeld's influence over the Defense Intelligence Agency, which coördinates and analyzes all military intelligence, one former senior official said, "If it became known that Rummy wanted them to link the government of Tonga to 9/11, within a few months they would come up with sources who'd do it."

In recent months, some of Rumsfeld's most trusted aides have staged private meetings with past and present military and intelligence officials to discuss the expanding war on terrorism. "There are five hundred guys out there you have to kill," a former C.I.A. official said. "There's no way to sugarcoat it—you just have to kill them. And you can't always be one hundred per cent sure of the intelligence. Sometimes you have to settle for ninety-five per cent."

The reality remains that action causes reaction, and last month's Predator raid in Yemen was not without consequences. The Yemeni government had planned to delay an announcement of the attack until it could issue a joint statement with Washington. When American officials released the story unilaterally, in time for Election Day, the Yemenis were angry and dismayed. Yahya al-Mutawakel, the deputy secretary-general for the ruling General People's Congress Party, complained bitterly that the Administration was far too eager to talk about its success. "This is why it is so difficult to make deals with the United States," al-Mutawakel told the *Christian Science Monitor*. "This is why we are reluctant to work closely with them. They don't consider the internal circumstances in Yemen."

On November 29th, a powerful explosion shook government buildings in Marib province, the Yemen *Times* reported, leaving an unmistakable message. "This blast is more than just an explosion," a tribal sheikh told the newspaper. "It must be a message from Al Qaeda saying, 'We are here, and we can strike.' This is serious." ♦



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LIFE AND LETTERS

BIRDS AND LIONS

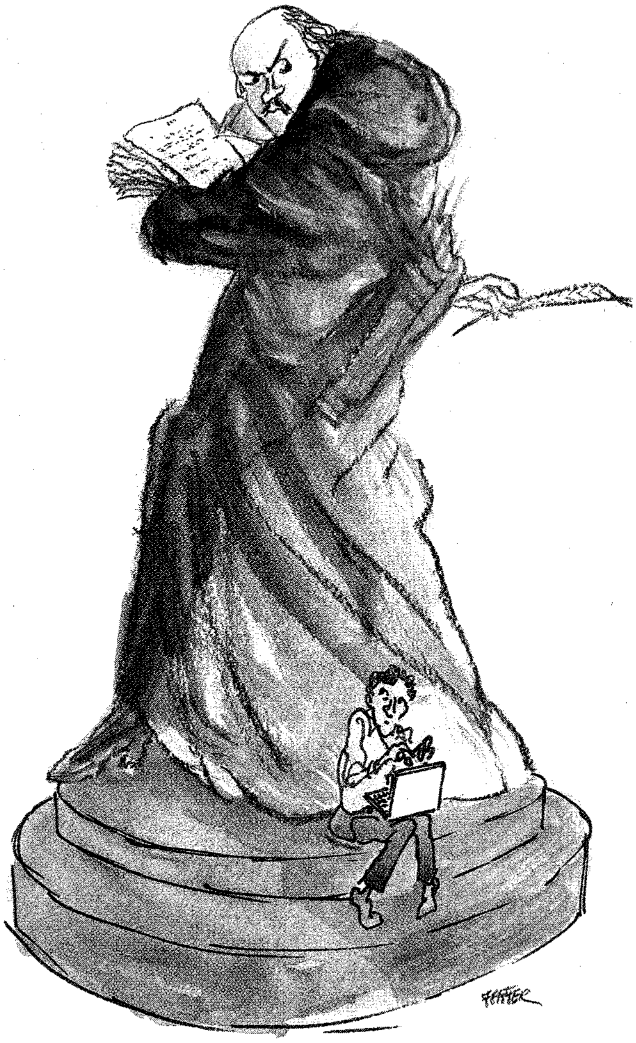
Writing from the inside out.

BY NORMAN MAILER

A young writer, if he is unknown, can be at a party and watch what everyone is doing. If he has a marvellous ear for dialogue, he can wake up the next morning and remember all that was said and how it was said. He is a bird on a branch. Sees like a bird and writes books that are extraordinarily well observed. But once he is successful, especially if that happens quickly, it's as if the bird were now an emu. It cannot fly. It grows haunches and foreshoulders and a mane: lo and behold, it is a lion. And everyone is looking at the lion, including the birds. But it is a lion with the heart of a bird and the mind of a bird. So there is a terrible period when the transmogrified emu is trying to live like a lion and has little talent for it. Then the beast begins to experiment. When it runs, it now sees other animals scamper. It takes a while—often years—for the writer to get to appreciate his effect on others, and even longer to begin to understand human beings again. In the old days, he could write about friends, enemies, and strangers by intuition, by induction; now he puts it together by deduction. Of course, he does have more material on which to work his deductions.

When a surgeon operates on a young girl, he isn't saying, "I'm going to make an incision on this young lady's stomach that not only is going to scar her but will affect her sex life to some degree for the next thirty years." He just says, "Scalpel, nurse," and does it. The surgeon is focussed on the act, not its reverberations.

As a novelist, you are engaged in something analogous. Novelists are oxymorons. They are sensitive and insensitive. Full of heart and heartless. You have to be full of heart to feel what other people are feeling. On the other hand, if you start thinking of all the damage you are going to do, you can't write the book—not if you're reasonably decent. (Of course, a malicious person might kick off the traces, and feel young and happy again at being so mean.) The point is that you are facing a true problem. Either you produce a book that doesn't approach what really interests you or, if you go to the root with all you've got, there is no way you won't injure family, friends, and innocent bystanders.



Shakespeare looked for superb dialogue, not judgments.

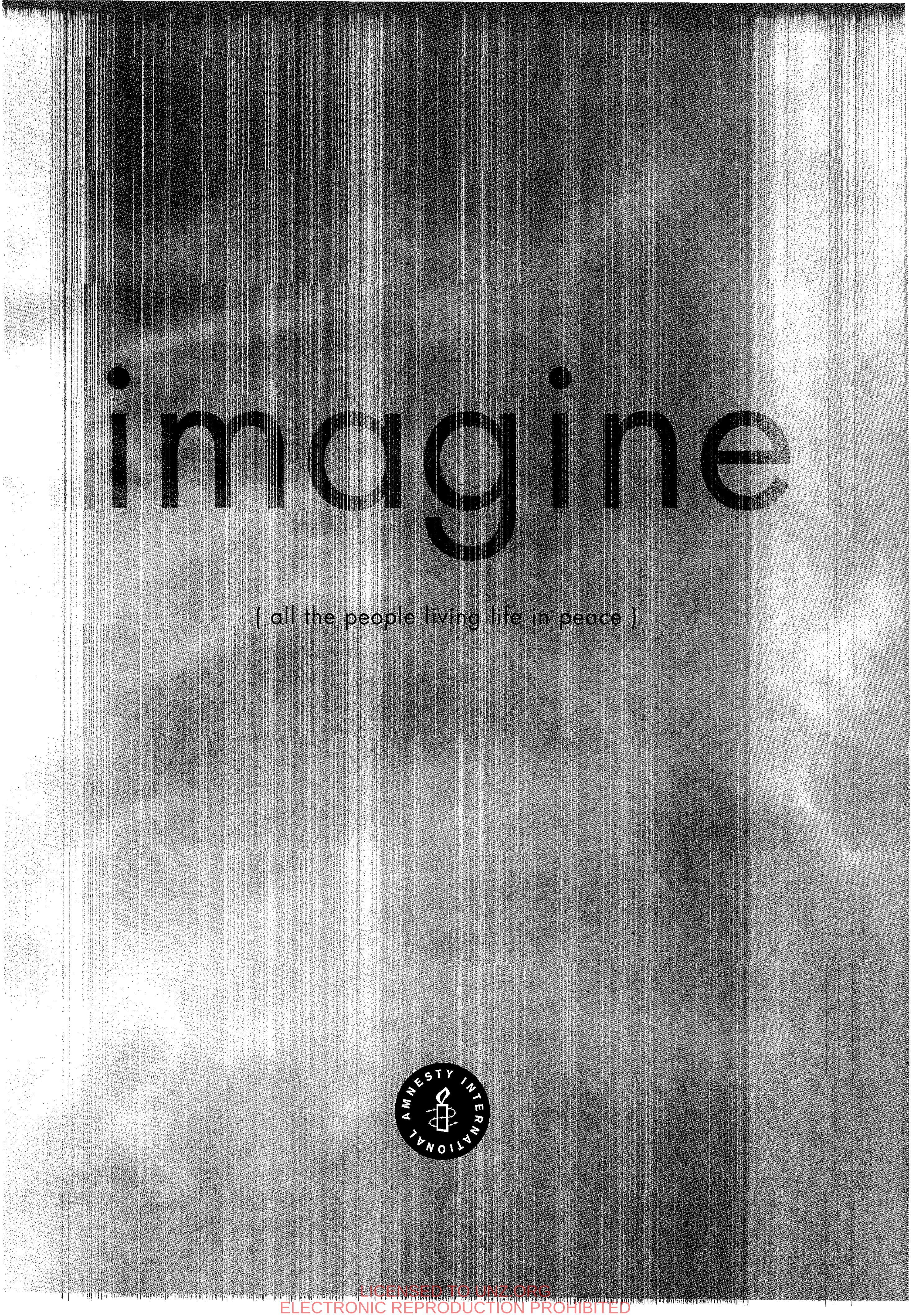
JULES FEIFFER

Part of the art of being a novelist is to obtain experience without falsifying it through the act of observation. Generally speaking, it's easier to take in such knowledge when you are part of an event that is much larger than yourself—like the fall of the Twin Towers. There must be five hundred young writers in New York who had an incomparable day of experience on September 11th—nothing remotely like that had ever happened before in their lives. And it's likely that some extraordinary work will come out of it. Hopefully, not all about September 11th. If they never write about it, but were in the vicinity that day, they could in time come to describe a battle in a medieval war and provide a real sense of such an event. They might write a horror tale. Or a story about the sudden death of a beloved. Or a march of refugees. What doesn't always work is to go at it directly. That kind of writing is exhausted quickly. And the temptation to dive in head on is, of course, immense.

One of the cruellest remarks in the language is: Those who can, do; those who can't, teach. The parallel must be: Those who have experience, learn to live; those who don't, write.

The second remark has as much truth as the first—which is to say, some truth. Of course, many a young writer has put himself in danger in order to pick up material for his writing, but, as a matter to make one wistful, not one major American athlete, politician, engineer, trade-union official, surgeon, airline pilot, chess master, call girl, sea captain, bureaucrat, mafioso, pimp, recidivist, physicist, rabbi, movie star, clergyman, priest, or nun has emerged as a major novelist since the Second World War.

What with ghostwriters,



imagine

(all the people living life in peace)

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

An 80-year-old woman, one of countless civilian war victim
living in the basement of her bombed-out Chechen hom
Photo: Magnu

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

(all the people sharing all the world)

Out of the ashes of World War II, as the death toll was still being counted, a remarkable woman imagined a universal standard of human rights for all the world's governments and their citizens.

The woman was Eleanor Roosevelt, and her vision helped inspire the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Adopted by the United Nations in 1948, it remains a basis of international human rights law – *"that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."*

Years later, another visionary added his own elegant prescription for peace on earth. John Lennon's anthem, "Imagine," expressed a desire shared by many around the globe, if their leaders would only listen. *"Imagine all the people sharing all the world."*

Today, at the dawn of the 21st century, and in the wake of 9/11, Amnesty International not only imagines, but insists, that such a just and peaceful world is still possible. But only if we act.

History has taught us that the key to achieving peace and security in a world menaced by war, terror, and brutal repression is to ensure the consistent protection of human rights and to demand accountability from anyone who would deny those rights.

For more than 40 years, Amnesty International members have campaigned for human rights and helped save countless lives. Through the strength of our worldwide membership, we continue to defend people unjustly imprisoned, tortured, or persecuted, often at the hands of their own governments, simply for who they are or what they believe.

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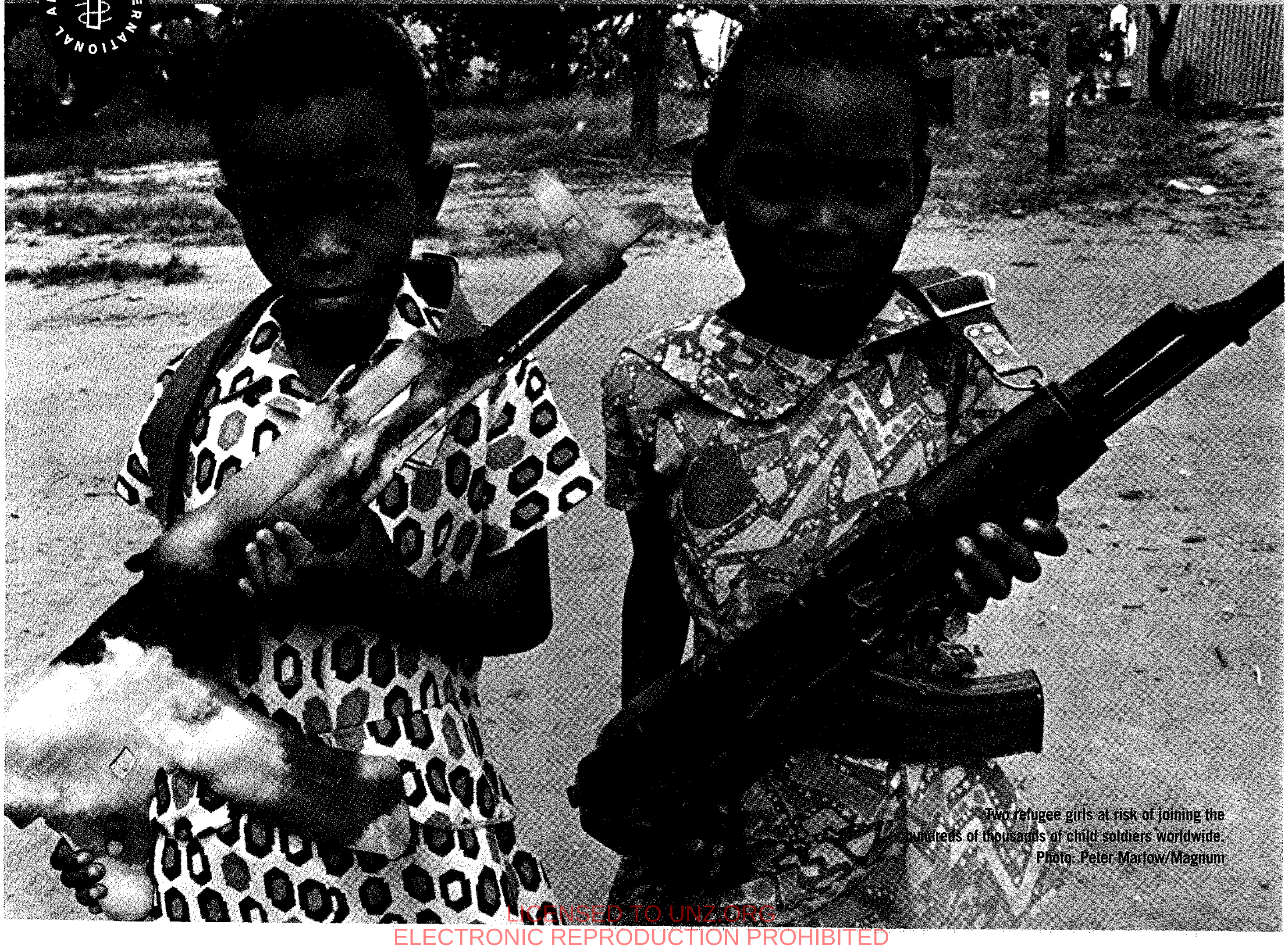
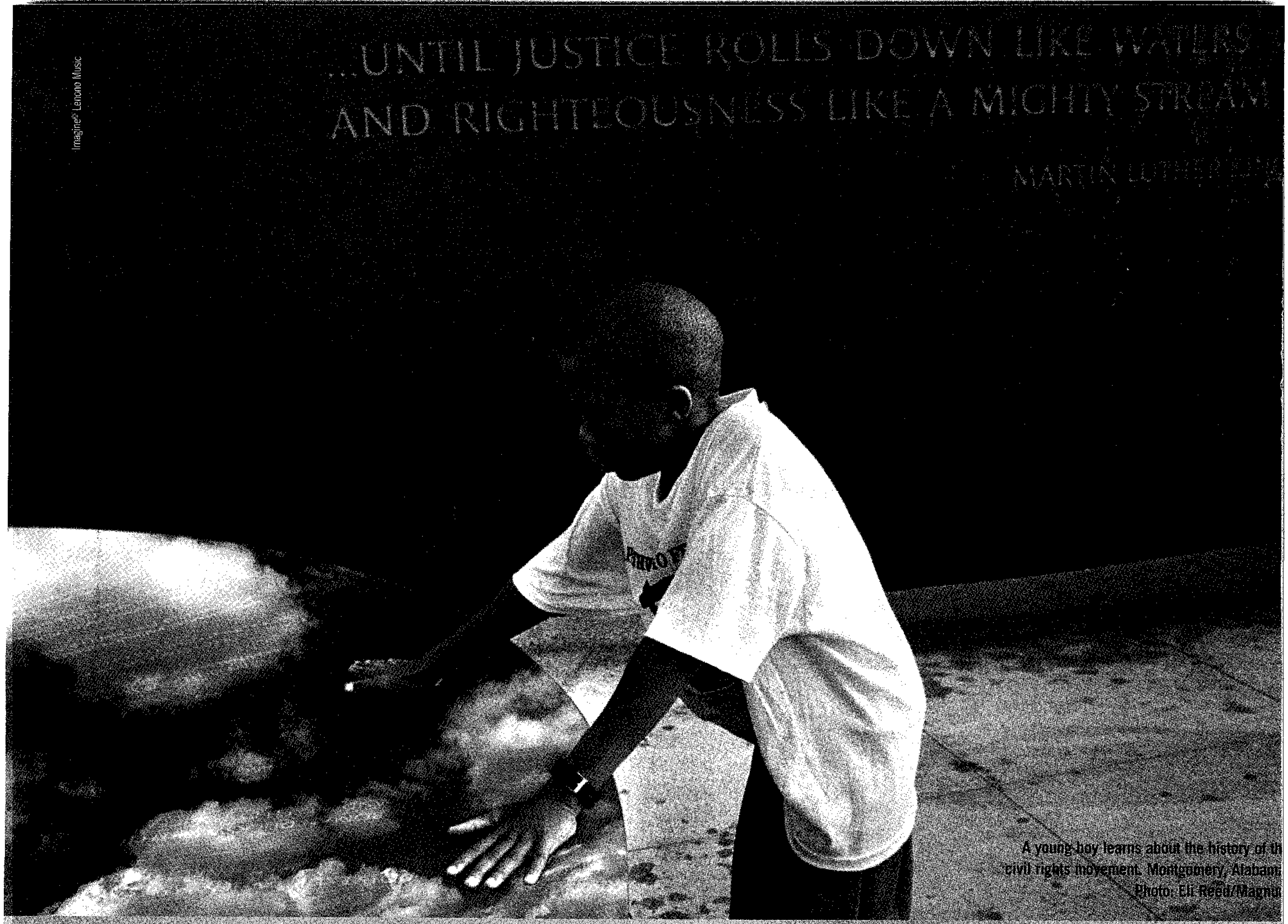
Imagine ending violence against women
Violence against women is rampant worldwide. It is rooted in a global culture that denies women equal rights and often prevents them from seeking help. Through education and action, Amnesty International works to save women's lives.

Imagine no discrimination based on sexual orientation
Some countries persecute gays and lesbians for engaging in homosexual acts or for merely appearing to be homosexual. They can be punished by execution, including stoning and beheading. Amnesty International works to protect and defend the rights of all people.

(nothing to kill or die for)



Two refugee girls at risk of joining the hundreds of thousands of child soldiers worldwide.
Photo: Peter Marlow/Magnum


...UNTIL JUSTICE ROLLS DOWN LIKE WATERS
AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE A MIGHTY STREAM
MARTIN LUTHER KING

A young boy learns about the history of th
civil rights movement. Montgomery, Alabam
Photo: Eli Reed/Magnu

Imagine© Lenono Music

(you may say i'm a dreamer, but i'm not the only one)

Imagine creating a safer, more peaceful world — one person at a time, one action at a time.

It's easy if you try.

Human rights are not something outside of our control. They belong to each of us. When they are sacrificed in one place, there are consequences for us all. For that reason, and in light of current world events, Amnesty International makes this urgent plea for your support. If we do not act now to secure human rights for all, we risk ending up on the wrong side of history and will forfeit the chance to create a safer world for our children.

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collaborators, and editors hand-cranking the tongues of the famous long enough to get their memoirs into tape recorders, it could be said that some dim reflection can be found in literature of the long aisles and huge machines of that social mill which is the world of endeavor—yes, just about as much as comes back to us from a photograph insufficiently exposed. So, for every good novel about a trade union that has been written from the inside, we have ten thousand better novels to read about authors and the social activities of their friends. Writers tend to live with writers just as automotive engineers congregate in the same country clubs of the same suburbs around Detroit.

But, just as we pay for the social insularity of Detroit engineers by having to look at the repetitive hump of their designs until finally what is most amazing about the automobile is how little it has been improved in the past fifty years, so literature suffers from its own endemic hollow: we are overfamiliar with the sensitivity of the sensitive and relatively ignorant of the cunning of the strong and the stupid. We remain one—it may be fatal—step removed from an intimate perception of the procedures of the corporate, financial, governmental, Mafia, and working-class establishments. Investigative journalism has taken us into the guts of the machine, but not far enough—we still do not have much idea of the soul of any inside operator. We do not, for instance, yet have a clue to what makes a quarterback ready for a good day or a bad one. Moreover, the best investigative journalism tends to rest on too narrow an ideological base—the rational, ironic, fact-oriented world of the media liberal. So we have a situation, call it a cultural malady, of the most basic sort—a failure of sufficient detail (that is, literary detail) to inform our assessments. No matter how much we read, we tend to know too little of how the world works.

I've always been drawn more toward realism than fantasy, because it seems to me that realism is endlessly interesting and finally indeterminable. Realism is a species of fantasy that's much more integrated and hard-core than fantasy itself, but if you are ready to come to grips with the inevitable slipperiness of most available facts, you come to recognize that realism is not a direct approach to the truth so much as it is the most concentrated form of fantasy.

One of my novels began one night in a Paris hotel room when I couldn't sleep. The room was tiny, the double bed took up almost all the floor, and you could break your toe trying to walk around. I didn't want to go rummaging in my suitcase for a book, so I picked up a Gideon Bible (in English!) on my bedside table and started reading. I hadn't looked at the New Testament in thirty or forty years, but I recalled that a man named Fulton Oursler had once sold more than a million copies of a book called "The Greatest Story Ever Told." Now, with the Gospels in my hand, I thought, Well, this may be the greatest story, but it is certainly being told abominably. Sayings popped out of the New Testament that were worthy of Shakespeare, but much in those double columns was poorly described. An ungainly prose pronged with golden nuggets. I thought, There have to be a hundred novelists in the world who can do a better job. I'm one of them.

The notion was intriguing. When I thought of all the hypocrites and corruptibles and power seekers who had been living with the Gospels for centuries, standing foursquare on any gnomic chunk of text they could use to abet their aims, I decided, Why not just tell the story?

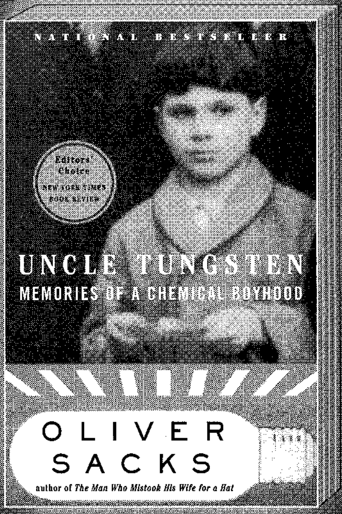
The difficulty of such a book would be to write about a man considerably nicer than myself. That is never easy. To fashion a character who is meaner than you are—a piece of cake. But to do someone who is better? It's too close to self-serving. Jean Malaquais once remarked that you can write about any character but one. "Whom?" "A novelist more talented than yourself." I thought, This is analogous. A finer sense of morality is also a higher talent.

Moreover, I had to decide whether to travel in first person or in third. First person would have everyone saying, "That egomaniac. Does Mailer now think that he's Jesus Christ? What an overinflamed vanity!" That's the bad side, I thought, but at least I can avoid the larger mistake of doing it in the third person. Because that would soon get mixed up with the actual text of the Gospels, and the reader would

"A rare gem. ... A joyous, wistful, generous and tough-minded memoir"
—*The New York Times Book Review*

from

Oliver Sacks
Author of *Awakenings* and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*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wonder, Is this sentence from the New Testament or was it added? That can only make for a squirrelly experience as one reads. All right, then. First person. Damn the torpedoes, first person. Play the ace.

Before I was done, it had taken a year from that night in a much too small hotel room on the Île Saint-Louis.

In the course of fashioning a character, you invariably reach a point where you recognize that you don't know enough about the person you are trying to create. At such times, I take it for granted that my unconscious knows more than I do. As you go through life, you do, after all, observe everyone, wittingly and unwittingly. Out of the corner of your eye, you glimpse someone in a restaurant who represents a particular menace or possibility, potentially a friend or a foe—and the unconscious goes to work on that. It needs very little evidence to put together a comprehensive portrait, because, presumably, it has already done most of that labor. To use an unhappy analogy, the unconscious is a powerful computer that rarely needs new sources to fashion a portrait, because so much knowledge has already been stored away.

On the other hand, the unconscious can often feel violated by what we demand, by what, indeed, we manage to extract from it. Perhaps a great deal of the material it is now supplying was originally filed away for its own purposes. Suppose the unconscious has a root in the hereafter which our conscious mind does not. If so, it will have deeper notions about death than we do. Let us then dare to surmise that the unconscious is on close, even familial, terms with that most elusive presence in the conscious mind—our soul. If that is the case, the unconscious will feel exploited by the novelist's push to extract so much of its resources.

Suppose the relation of the unconscious to the conscious is analogous to that of a cultivated Greek slave in service to an overbearing Roman master. The unconscious is full of the trickiest kinds of resistance. It can emit a sullenness. All the writer receives, then, is a sense of dull, edgy resentment. Perhaps the unconscious is not ready to plumb into the material requested. The acute form of this mulishness is writer's block. But, for that matter, there is a touch of writer's block in almost every working day. It is part of the experience of writing.

When you are faced with this situation, there is a tendency to force a continuation, but that can be equal to blowback. From its point of view, the unconscious has done its job. It's damned if it's going to give you any more right now. If you insist, flatness of affect will be your reward—nothingness, the dread antagonist. One of the most painful elements in the act of writing is to live so much of the day with that nothingness. It is why many talented men and women produce a good book or two, then stop. To deal on a daily basis with nothingness is vitiating. Writers who have been at it for decades often do not keep a vital inner life.

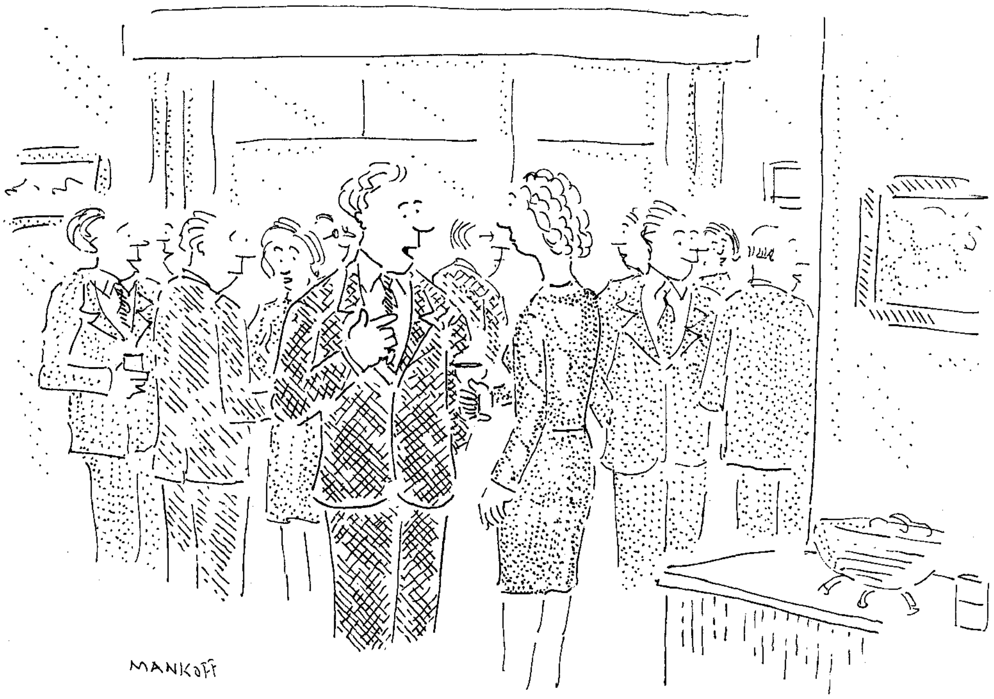
In John Ford Noonan's very funny play, "Talking Things Over with Chekhov," the following anecdote is told in shorter form. Whether or not it actually happened seems to be beside the point. The occasion lived for me with such intensity that I came to decide it was true. It was just too good a story not to believe it.

Somewhere around the turn of the century, Chekhov visits Tolstoy. He takes the train to the nearest station. Let's say it's wintertime. He rents two horses and a sled and drives out through the snow to Yasnaya Polyana. Tolstoy is pretty old by now, big, strong, severe, of course, and sits him right down and they talk. They drink tea and they talk. Tolstoy says, "Chekhov, you are a very good writer. You are excellent. Some of your short stories are so good I would have been pleased to have written them myself. But, Chekhov, I must tell you: You are a terrible playwright! You are awful! You are even worse than Shakespeare!"

Afterward, Chekhov drives back to the railroad station through the snow. In his journal he writes, "I whipped the horses. To the moon I shouted, 'I am even *worse* than Shakespeare!'"

It's a fine story. But I wondered, Why did Tolstoy dislike Shakespeare so? I expect the answer is that Tolstoy was always searching for subtle but precise moral judgment. That required a detailed sense of the sequence of events that could produce a dramatic or tragic event. You had to know how to assess blame. For that, you needed to know exactly when and why things happened.

But there, very much in the way, was Shakespeare, the greatest movie writer who ever existed—centuries before cinema had a silver screen. Shakespeare was not interested in making careful connections with his characters. Shake-



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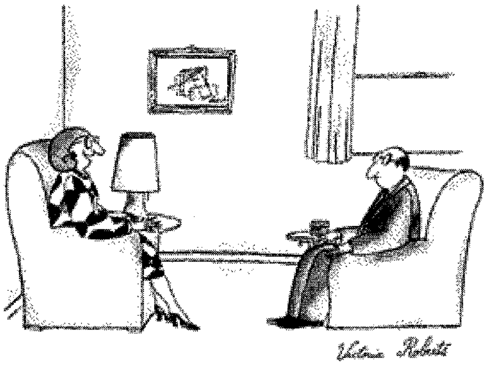

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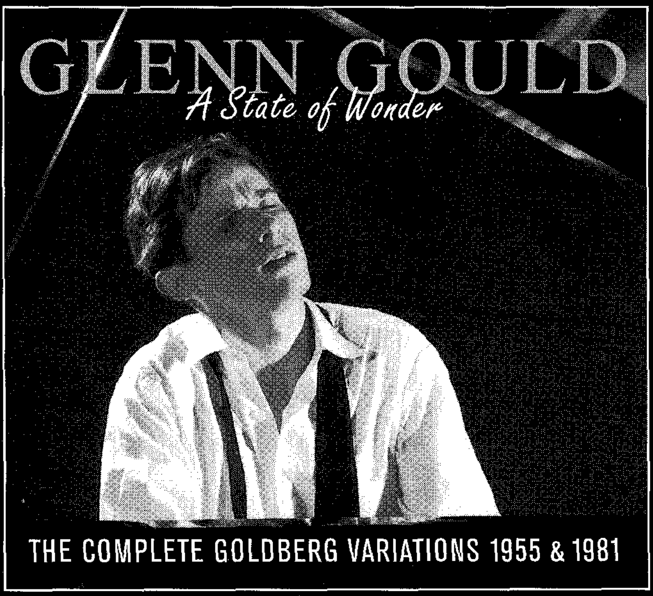

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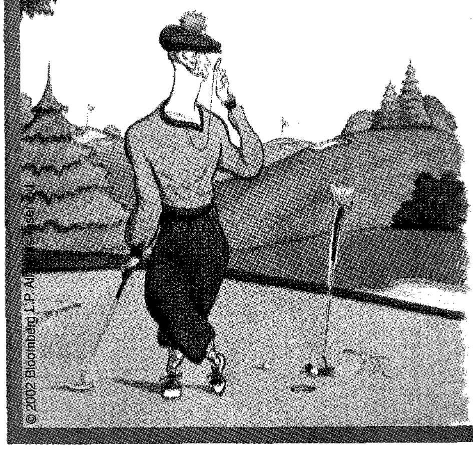

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speare was looking to get the most dynamic actors together under any circumstance available, no matter how contrived. He was looking for superb exchanges of dialogue and fantastic moments, vertiginous possibilities for the English language, whereas Tolstoy lived for the sobriety of moral judgment. So he considered Shakespeare a monster who paid attention to causality only when it was useful to him. Will's people do incredible things, fall in love and/or murder, usually with a minimum of preparation—Hamlet—and then deliver exceptional speeches that sear an audience's consciousness. To Tolstoy, this was monstrous. He must have looked at Shakespeare's plays the way some of us look these days on advertising campaigns that are stuffed with manipulation and little else—catchy ingredients for the sole purpose of leading people astray.

But why Tolstoy would compare Chekhov to Shakespeare is another question. If there is a reason, I suspect it was for a different set of faults. Tolstoy may have felt that Chekhov was a prelude to someone yet to arrive, someone like Beckett. The people in Chekhov's plays were simply not doing what they ought to be doing. It had to irritate Tolstoy immensely that Anton's actors sat in their own spiritual excrement and made sweet speeches and moaned a little and sighed and groaned and never got out of any situation. To Tolstoy, this was a cardinal sin. One should not live with the given if it is vapid or vaguely immoral. That was one of his most basic notions. One may have to endure a dreary state as a discipline, but one does not accept one's condition as eternal, as the meaning of life. Tolstoy could not permit that. Could not accept how Chekhov made so much of the essential inanition of the Russian middle class.

A very young writer sits on a park bench with his girl. He kisses her. He's seventeen. He's never had such a kiss before.

Later that night, he tries to capture the event. He writes:

> "I love you," he said.
> "I love you," she said.

He stops, throws down his pen, and says, "I'm a great writer!"

Sometimes you have to wait. ♦

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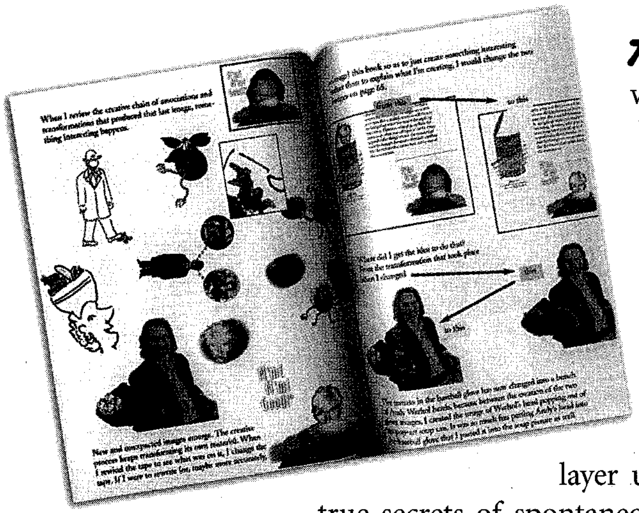

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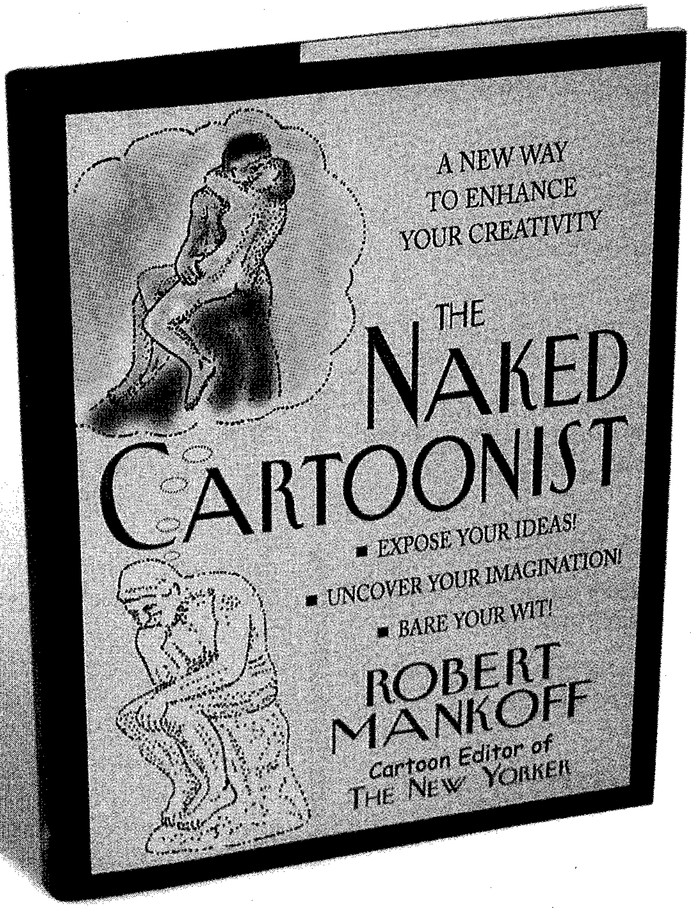
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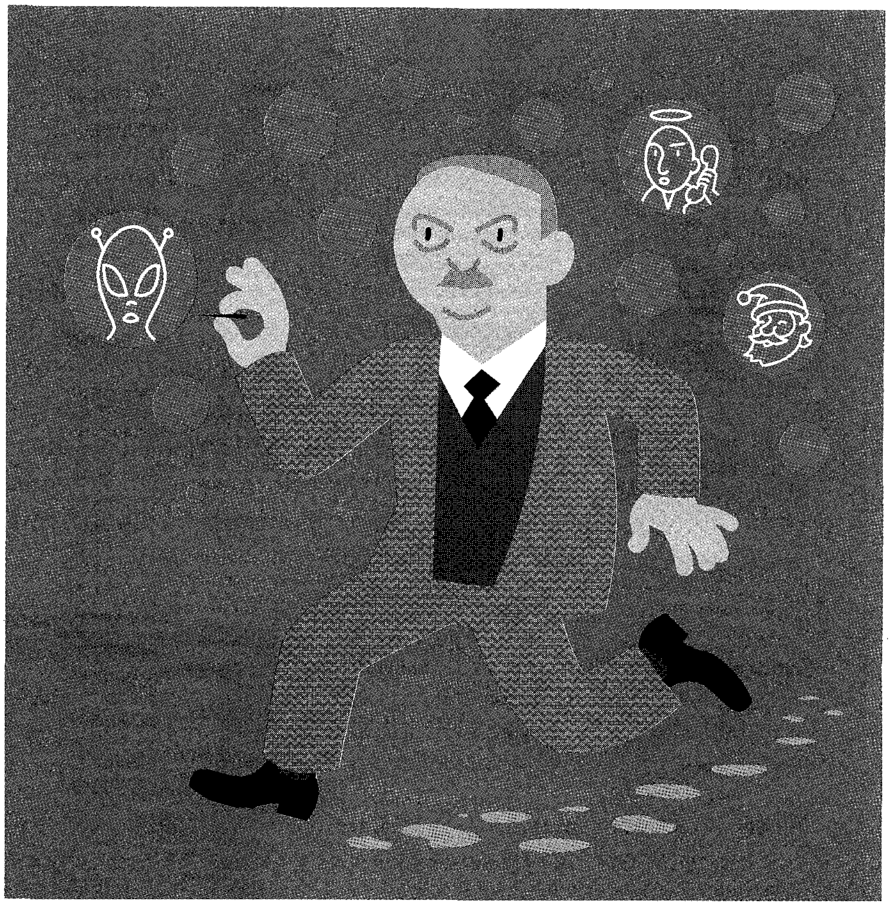
OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

WAITING FOR GHOSTS

The many careers of Joe Nickell, paranormal investigator.

BY BURKHARD BILGER


CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

Frauds use similar tricks, Nickell says, whether they're faking U.F.O.s or Jesus Christ.

The village of Lily Dale, New York, has been home to strange doings for so long that it hardly calls attention to itself anymore. Its brightly painted Victorian homes, clustered by the cobalt waters of Cassadaga Lake, an hour southwest of Buffalo, could belong to almost any artists' colony or vacation retreat. On summer days, the volunteer fire department throws barbecues and pancake breakfasts, and the citizens sun themselves on their front porches, calling out to one another across the narrow, sloping streets. Were it not for the wooden signs that hang from nearly every house—"Virgil Patterson, Medium," "Ghost Crossing," "Readings Available"—you might never guess that this is the world's largest center for the religion of Spiritualism. Yet, for ten weeks every summer, nearly twenty-five thousand visitors come here to talk to their dead. Lily Dale, they believe, is a kind of satellite dish for the spirit world.

On a recent afternoon, a hundred and fifty people were gathered in a forest clearing near the town's pet cemetery, facing the remains of an ancient oak known as Inspiration Stump. For the past hour, a succession of mediums had come before the crowd, conveyed a few messages from the dearly departed, and disappeared into the trees again. Now a woman with red hair and a flowing white blouse glided onstage, her eyes bulging with precognition. "You, in the violet shirt," she shouted, lifting a bony finger toward an elderly woman with thick glasses and white curls. "I see a man with silver hair. He's worried about something in your basement, something structural. He's saying you can't put off fixing it anymore." The old woman blinked and braced for more, but the medium had already moved on to the next spirit in line. The afterlife, it seemed, was thronging with communicants.

Looking around at the crowd, I didn't see a single sideward glance or quizzical smile, and the strength of all that belief was a little unsettling. Already that morning, a man with snow-white hair and a blissful mien had ministered to me at a "healing service" in the Spiritualist church, mumbling incantations as he laid his hands on my forehead. Later, during a private reading by the Reverend John White, a vice-president of the Spiritual Science Fellowship, I was told that I was an Anglo-Saxon crusader in a previous life, that I had a Native American spirit guide, that I would one day go bungee-jumping on a "spiritual warrior quest" to cure my fear of heights, and that my body needed more antioxidants. I couldn't really see myself in what he said (though I am afraid of heights), or bring myself to believe, as one medium put it, that educated people give off a pink aura, while extroverts glow yellow. But the people at Lily Dale listened with rapt expressions. When the spirits advised one man to go back to school, another to lay off sweet pickles, they nodded their heads and waited for the next revelation.

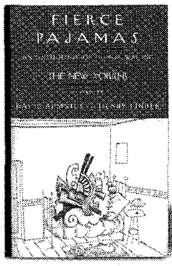
All except one. As the crowd got up to leave, I caught sight of a curious figure standing at the back. He was tall and bulky, with dark shades and a battered straw hat. When I walked down the aisle past his row, he fell in step beside me, his lips pursed beneath a trim gray mustache. "I changed my look in the car before I came over," he murmured, as the crowd dispersed. "You wouldn't want them to recognize me."

His name was Joe Nickell, and this was one of his simpler disguises. He has been known to shave his mustache, walk with a cane, or do any number of things to fool his suspects, who know his usual persona all too well. At the age of fifty-eight, Nickell is the country's most accomplished investigator of the paranormal. He has appeared on "Oprah," "20/20," "Larry King Live," and dozens of other television shows—a sharp-tongued and amiably pompous old gumshoe, with thinning gray hair and shopworn tweeds. He has written or co-written sixteen books, all of which are still in print. The latest is called "Real-Life X-Files."

Like a lot of people, I first heard of Nickell through one of his alter egos. I'd been told that he is an expert on antique ink and paper, and the forensic analysis of historic documents. His Ph.D. dissertation was on literary investigation, and in 1990 he published one of the few sourcebooks in the field, "Pen, Ink & Evidence." Nickell has since been asked to authenticate everything from manuscripts of the Gettysburg Address to "The Bondwoman's Narrative," which is believed to be the first novel written by a black woman in America. When I met him, he was embroiled in a debate on the authorship of the poem "An Account of a Visit from Saint Nicholas," which is better known as "The Night Before Christmas" and is perhaps the country's most famous poem.

But all that, I found, was just moonlighting. Nickell's day job is with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP, for short). Lily Dale wasn't among his current targets, but it was a good example of the kinds of communities he tends to infiltrate. We had arranged this rendezvous earlier that day. Now, as we walked back into town, Nickell said nothing for a while. He has an odd fondness for Lily Dale. Its mediums are believers rather than showmen or frauds. They have to be active members of the Spiritualist church in order to own a house in town, and their psychic abilities must be tested and approved by the Lily Dale Board of Directors. Any medium who has had three or more complaints lodged against him in a year has to be retested.

Still, few mediums can stand up to careful scrutiny. Two years ago, "Dateline NBC" asked Nickell to serve as a consultant for a segment on the medium John Edward, the host of the show "Crossing Over." At Nickell's urging, the producers kept Edward and his audience apart before the show, so that he couldn't glean any information for his psychic readings. During the taping, though, Edward surprised everyone. He communicated with a spirit named Anthony, who appeared to be the dead father of one of the show's cameramen. When Edward mentioned a ring, the camera-



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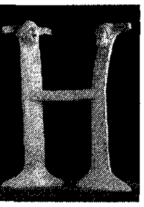

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man recalled that he had slipped one on his father's finger at the funeral. "That did seem kind of amazing," Nickell told me. Only later did Edward admit that he had talked to the cameraman about his father once before, while they were shooting a roll of background footage for the show.

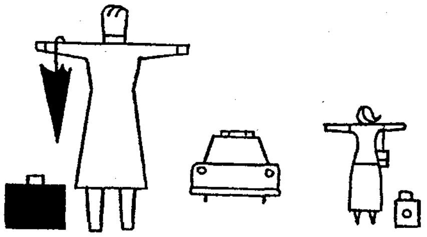
"We caught him cheating," Nickell said, but his voice held an odd disappointment. Someday, he insists, his investigations may unveil a wonder that even science can't explain away. Yet his subjects inevitably fail him. A hundred and twenty-three years ago, when Lily Dale was founded, the dead at least had style. Western New York was known as the "burned-over district" then—a crucible for Mormonism, Christian Science, Seventh-Day Adventism, and countless cults and utopian colonies. To attract audiences, Spiritualists levitated objects during séances, conjured "spirit paintings" of the dead out of thin air, and covered entire slates in ghostly Victorian prose. "Oh, my darling, thank God, thank God, at last I'm through," Harry Houdini's dead mother told him when she contacted him through a medium in 1922. Never mind that she had spoken only German and broken English when she was alive.

Now, after a long decline, Spiritualism has made a comeback. Every major network has put mediums on prime time, and cable is filled with tales of the paranormal. Last year, a Gallup poll found that half of all Americans believe in E.S.P., more than forty per cent believe in demonic possession and haunted houses, and about a third believe in astrology, clairvoyance, and ghosts. The dead have our full attention, it seems, yet the most they can muster is some stale pop psychology and a few tips on home repair. "If they've crossed to the other side, why don't they have anything meaningful to say?" Nickell said. Then he added, in a lower voice, "And, if they do, for heaven's sake why can't they speak up?"

Nickell calls himself a skeptic, but he means the word more as a term of affiliation than as a habit of mind. Since CSICOP was founded, in 1976, it has spawned an international movement of humanists and rationalists. The committee, headed by Paul Kurtz, a retired philosophy professor, supports scholarly critiques of pseudoscience and publishes the magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*, for which Nickell writes a regular column. (He is the committee's only full-time investigator, and he has a small endowment for that purpose.) At last count, CSICOP and its offshoots had some fifty thousand donors and subscribers. Together, Kurtz says, they represent "the largest free-thought movement in the history of this country."

The CSICOP headquarters are situated on the outskirts of Buffalo, in a modern glass-and-stucco building that seems meant to suggest the purity and rigor of a rational mind. Nickell doesn't have much patience with its pretensions. Leading me down an enclosed walkway that connects to an older section of the building, he pointed to a small courtyard off to the side. "That's our combination picnic area and U.F.O. landing pad," he said. "We ask that only small U.F.O.s land there. For the larger ones, there's a wilderness area on the other side." When we came to a door that had a sticker of a crossed-out alien on it, he stopped. Above the lintel, a small sign had been posted: "AREA 51. Top-Secret Research Facility. No Trespassing. Violators Will Vanish Without a Trace." Nickell reached for the knob and paused, fixing me with a hard stare. "Prepare yourself," he said.

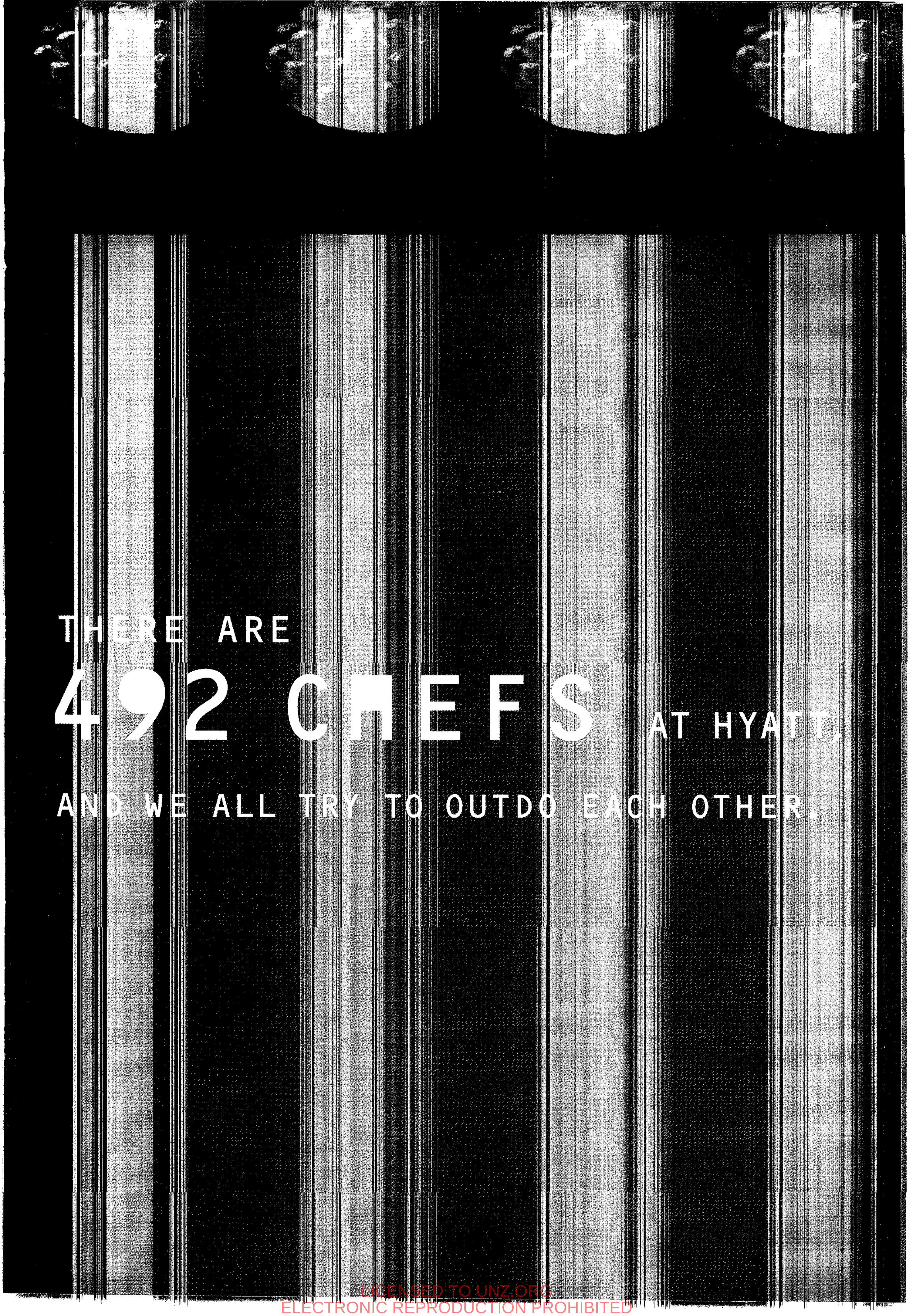
Inside were two radically different spaces, like parallel universes brought briefly into contact. Nickell's laboratory was to the right: small and brightly lit, with white counters and walls, an array of microscopes and burners, and a cabinet filled with chemicals. Directly ahead were the holdings of the Skeptiseum: an online exhibit of mementos and artifacts, collected over a lifetime of snooping around haunted houses, revival tents, and U.F.O. conventions. Its shelves and bookcases overflowed with astrology kits, voodoo dolls, energy stones, religious fetishes, shrunken heads, and pyramid power devices. Across the room, a ghostly blond boy, long deceased, gazed sadly from a spirit painting at a miniature shrine to "The X-Files." What space remained had been invaded by aliens of all sizes and species—stuffed, inflated, ceramic, and quilted; shaped into pencil boxes, night-lights, and gumball machines.



It was a detailed inventory of American superstition, a catalogue of a century's mad invention. It was also, quite literally, a little boy's dream. Growing up in West Liberty, Kentucky, in the foothills of the Appalachians, Nickell was an exceptionally curious child. "I dreamed of becoming a magician," he told me. "I dreamed of becoming an investigator. I dreamed of becoming lots of things, and eventually I became most of them." His father was a postmaster, a science buff, and an amateur magician; his mother was the valedictorian of her class, and they indulged his obsessions to a fault. When Joe became interested in magic, his father taught him some of the tricks that he knew. When he turned to detective work, his parents bought him a professional fingerprinting kit and let him cover the house in black and white powders. (He sent his five best sets of prints to J. Edgar Hoover, who sent him a congratulatory letter.) Before long, he had set aside a room as a crime lab, stocked with the kinds of combustibles that are now carefully tracked by the C.I.A.

"I never did get a formal chemistry background," Nickell said, as he showed me his lab. "But all those things have stayed with me." He uses sodium hydroxide and potassium ferrocyanide, for instance, to test the composition of inks in suspected forgeries. To search for "forger's tremor" and other signs of fraud, he lays documents under a microscope or enhances their script with ultraviolet light. Like most of his areas of expertise, this one is largely self-taught. He learned to recognize antique inks by re-creating them with oak galls and rainwater. He developed an eye for forgery by learning to mimic the world's most famous signatures. "Your Washington is even more magnificent than your Hitler," Charles Hamilton, who exposed the Hitler diaries as frauds, once wrote him. "Soon you will be able to reproduce Shakespeare, and then we can both retire to the south of France and luxuriate with beautiful girls."

Forgers and frauds tend to use similar tricks, Nickell says, whether counterfeit-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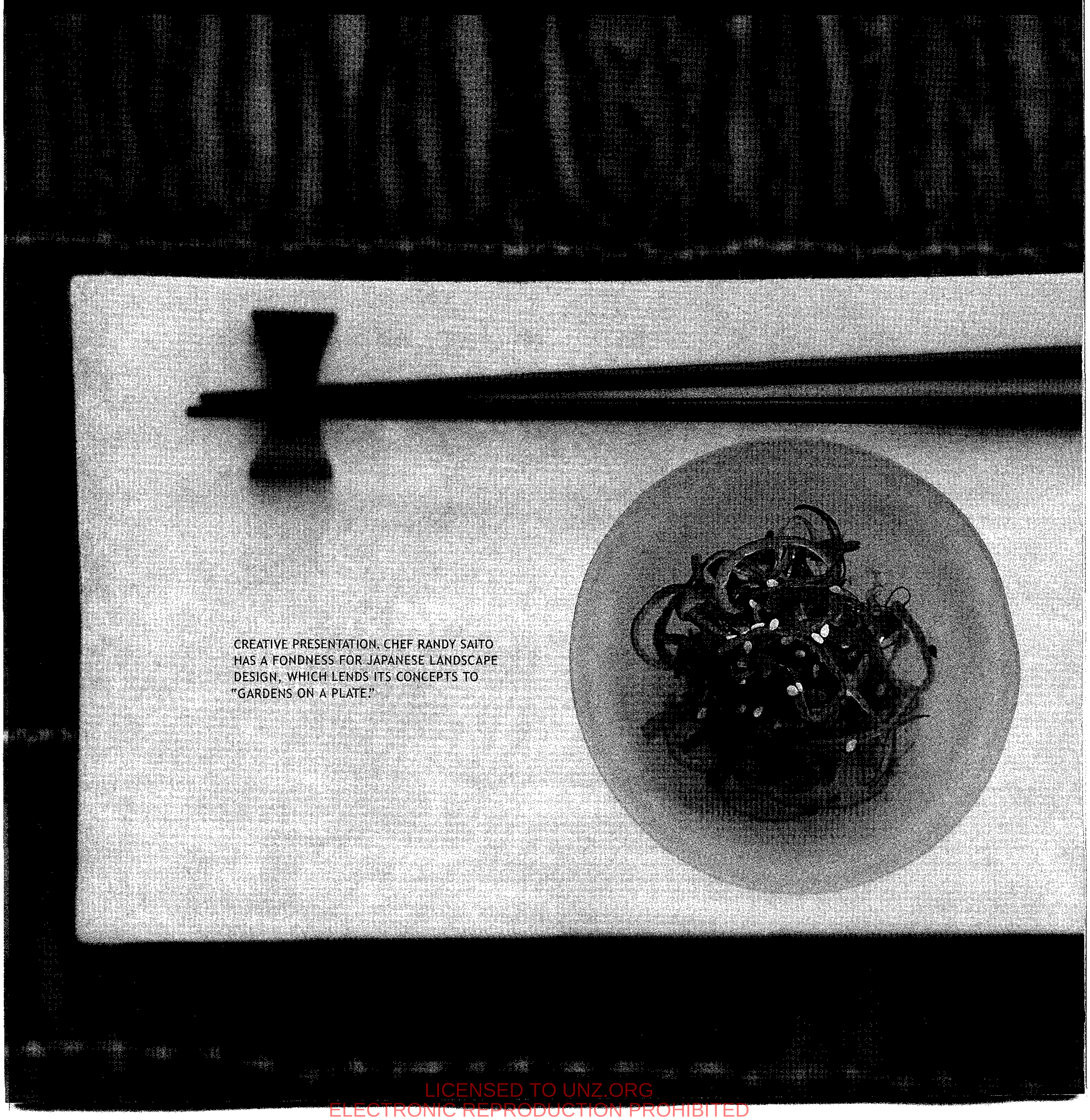

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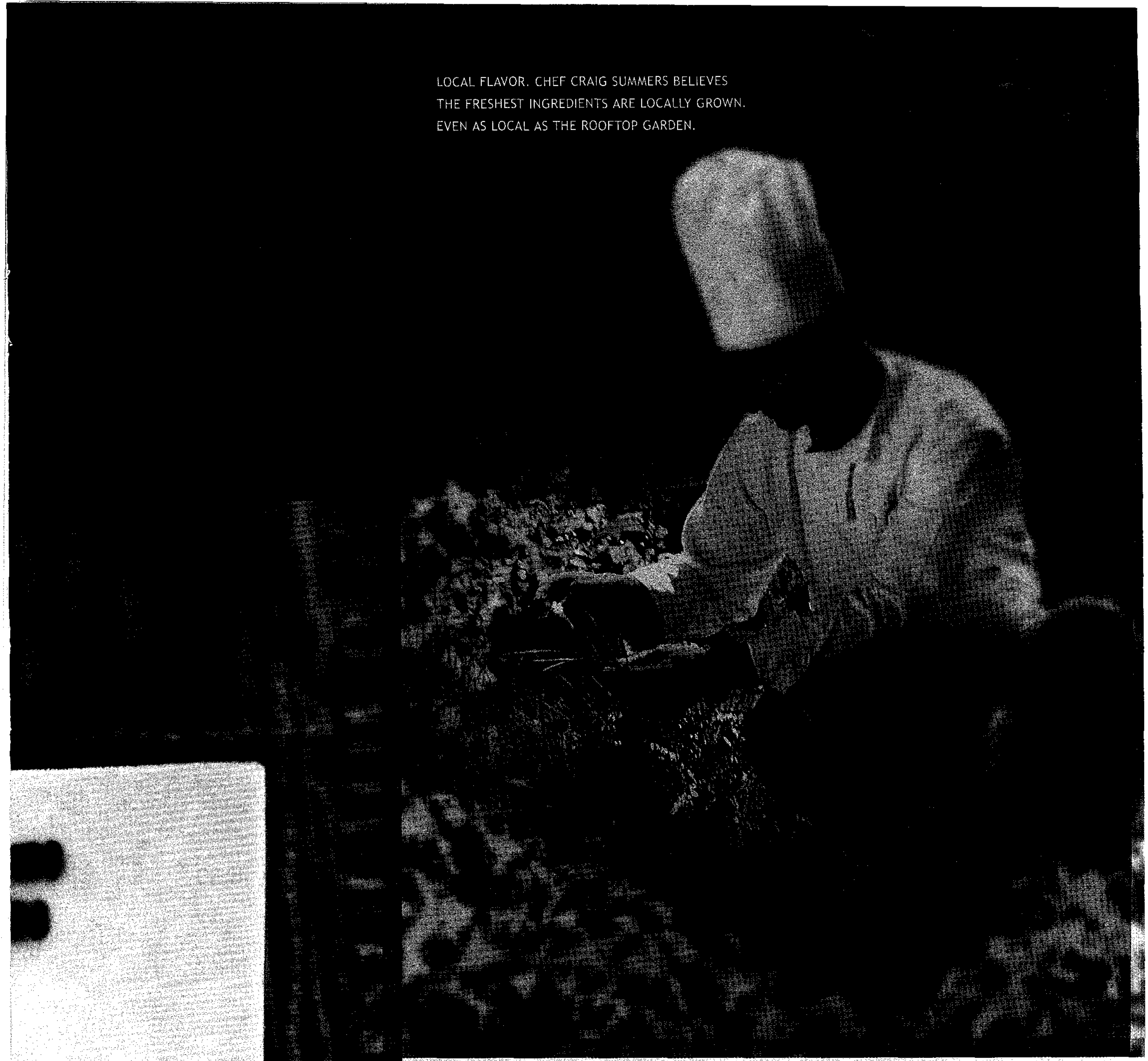

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MACADAMIA CRUSTED FISH

2 EA.	4-oz. fresh mahi mahi
2 OZ.	Macadamia nuts, chopped
2 OZ.	Panko (Japanese bread crumbs, or substitute regular bread crumbs)
½ TSP.	Paprika
½ CUP	Flour
3 EA.	Eggs
½ OZ.	Omao cilantro, chopped
	Salt and pepper to taste

Mix panko, paprika, macadamia nuts, cilantro, salt and pepper in a bowl. Set aside.

Whisk eggs in a bowl. Set aside.

Take fresh fish, season with salt and pepper. Coat both sides with flour, shake off excess flour. Place fish in egg bowl, moisten both sides. Bread fish with panko mixture.

In a sauté pan, heat olive oil on medium heat. Pan fry fish 2 minutes on each side until golden brown. Finish in oven if necessary.

Serve the following Hawaii-inspired sauce with the fish.

COFFEE LIQUEUR, LIME AND SWEET GINGER BUTTER SAUCE

2 TBSP.	Coffee liqueur
2 TSP.	Pickled ginger, minced
1 TBSP.	Butter
1 TSP.	Shallots
1 TBSP.	Heavy cream
1 TBSP.	Fresh lime juice

In a sauce pan, add coffee liqueur, lime, shallots, ginger and heavy cream. Simmer until volume is reduced 50%. Turn heat very low. While whisking sauce, slowly add butter until sauce is smooth.

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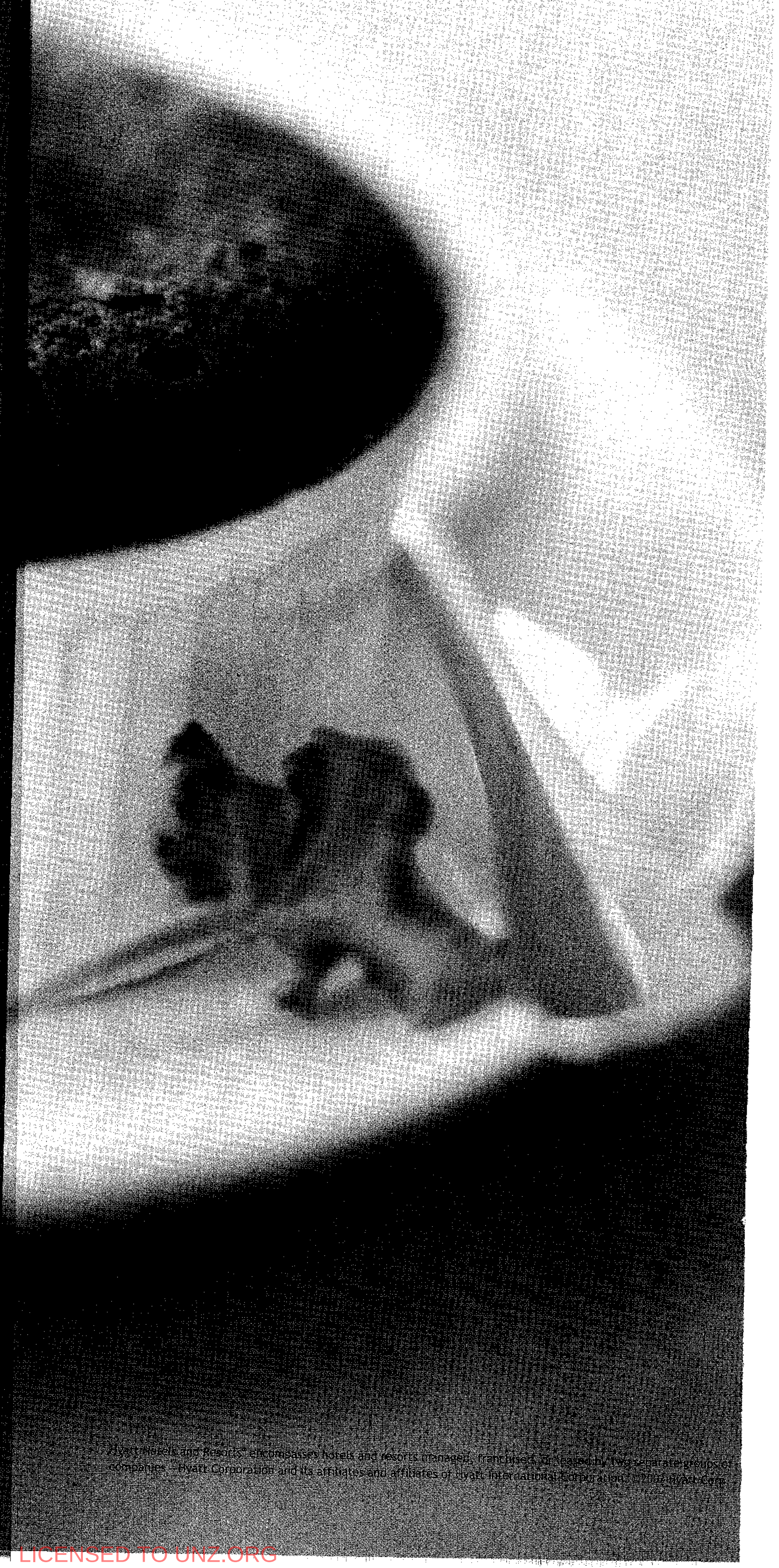

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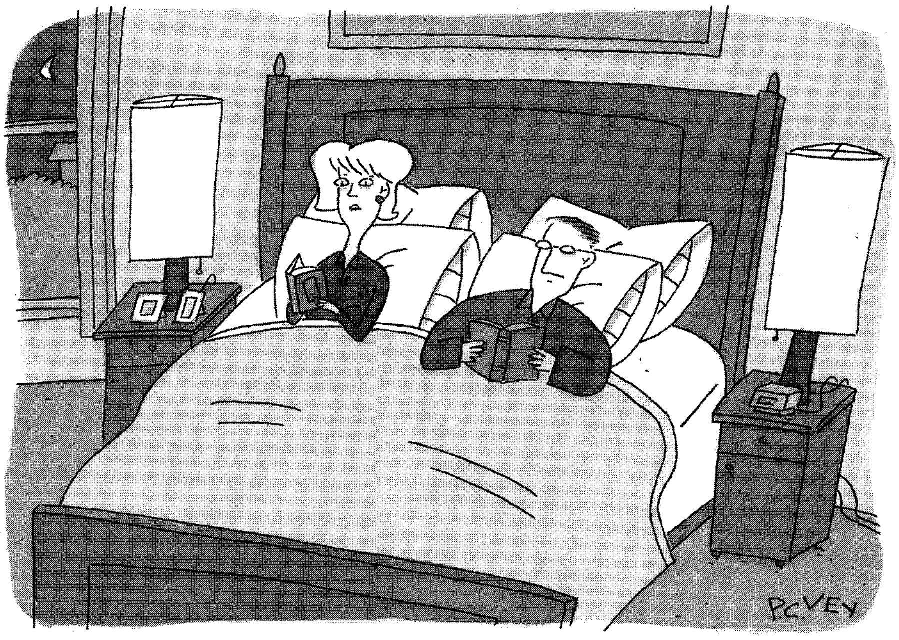
ing Hitler, U.F.O.s, or Jesus Christ. The Shroud of Turin, for instance, is said to have had Christ's image burned into it by a burst of radiance at his resurrection. The image looks so much like a photographic negative, believers say, that no medieval forger could possibly have made it. Tests have shown, however, that the "bloodstains" on the shroud are really ochre and vermillion paint, and carbon dating has placed its manufacture between 1260 and 1390 A.D. In his book "Inquest on the Shroud of Turin," Nickell explained how a similar image could be made with powdered pigments and a bas-relief sculpture. To illustrate, he created a Shroud of Bing Crosby.

As we talked, Nickell reached across the counter and pulled out a test tube that was half filled with a congealed, reddish-brown substance. "Have you ever heard of the miracle of San Gennaro?" he asked. In the early fourteenth century, the Cathedral of Naples, in Italy, began to covet one sacred relic above all others: the blood of St. Januarius, or San Gennaro. This blood, sealed inside an ornate reliquary, is said to remain perfectly solid until a priest who is truly inspired by God prays over it. Only then does the blood begin to flow. The effect has baffled generations of observers—even if it can be explained scientifically, how could a medieval Italian have achieved it?—and their bafflement has been taken as proof of the miracle's authenticity.

"It's a classic example of an argument made from ignorance, which is the whole basis of the paranormal," Nickell said. "They're not selling you an answer; they're selling you a mystery." In the late nineteen-eighties, Nickell, together with a forensic analyst from Orlando named John Fischer, set about re-creating the miracle, using only the simplest substances and techniques. After nearly three years of research, they hit upon a solution. By heating olive oil and beeswax in a double boiler, combining the liquids in precise quantities, and adding some iron oxide as a dye, they could make a blood-red liquid that would congeal in the cool air of a church vault. "But if a priest took the reliquary out and placed it on the altar, surrounded by candles, it would heat up again," Nickell said. He took the tube from his left hand, where he had been warming it, and gave it a quick shake. "It's a simple thing, really," he said, watching the "blood" flow down the inside of the glass tube. "And it's a miracle."



"Perhaps we should start reading books about having a child."

• •

It's doubtful that Nickell's experiment convinced many believers. The Cathedral would not allow the blood to be removed from its vial for testing. (A group of Italian chemists came up with another solution at around the same time—a "thixotropic gel" that turned solid when at rest, liquid when shaken—but that, too, was ignored.) Even if they had, the examination itself might have been said to dispel the blood's virtues. Miracles, like subatomic particles in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, seem to change form in the very act of analysis.

This doesn't bother Nickell much. Although he has an abiding contempt for paranormal frauds, he feels a certain kinship with true believers. His mother was a devout member of the Disciples of Christ, and he knows, at first hand, the appeal of unreasonable devotion. "Anything I've ever done, I've done fanatically," he says. "Anything worth doing is worth doing to the extreme." After his boyhood worship of J. Edgar Hoover, he grew to despise what the government stood for. He opposed the Vietnam War, even when his older brother became a captain in the Marines. (The two didn't speak for thirty years.) In 1967, he was teargassed beside the steps of the Pentagon, in the protest described in Norman Mailer's "The Armies of the Night." He marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., and kept the draft board at bay for a while by becoming a VISTA volunteer in the Deep South. When he was finally called for military service, in 1968, he fled to Canada.

It was in Toronto that he fell back on the tricks he had learned as a boy. He put together shows as Janus the Magician, Mendell the Mentalist, and Mister Twister the Magic Clown. In the summer, he worked as the house magician at the Houdini Magical Hall of Fame, in Niagara Falls. In later years, he headed out to the Yukon Territory, where he dealt cards, prospected for gold, ran riverboats, and m.c.'d the cancan show at Diamond Tooth Gertie's casino. "God help us if Nickell ever has an identity crisis," one of his friends joked at the time. "There'll be twenty of him running around not speaking to each other."

There is a picture of Nickell in those days, slouched against a wall in a magic-and-novelty shop, with a cigarette hanging from his lips. His body is thin and rangy, and his face has a wolfish look, with small, bright, eager eyes. He got into a lot of fights back then, he told me,

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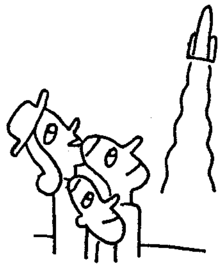
and once broke his hand beating another man's head against a bar table in Toronto. "I guess I've been the kind of guy, most of my life, who doesn't like to take guff off anybody."

For a magician in the nineteen-sixties—the time of Bigfoot, the Bermuda Triangle, and "The Chariots of the Gods" (the book, which argued that human culture had been seeded by creatures from outer space, became a best-seller in thirty-eight countries)—there were a lot of good fights to pick. Magic is really the art of deception, so magicians tend to be the first to spot a fraud. Houdini was so disillusioned by his attempts to contact his dead mother that he offered five thousand dollars to anyone who could demonstrate true supernatural powers. Then he chronicled their failures in his book "A Magician Among the Spirits." When Spiritualism began to reëmerge from the sideshows, in the nineteen-sixties, magicians were there to greet it once again. Three of the founding members of CSICOP were magicians—Ray Hyman, Martin Gardner, and James (the Amazing) Randi. They quickly exposed psychics like Uri Geller, who claimed that he could bend silverware with his mind. When Geller visited the staff of *Time*, Randi posed as a reporter and caught him bending a fork by hand.

Nickell himself toyed with tarot cards as a young man, but the claims for the paranormal soon grew too suspect for him to ignore. Inspired by Houdini, he set about investigating some local superstitions. In Toronto, for instance, he showed that the haunted footsteps in the infamous Mackenzie House were really coming from a late-night cleaning crew in the building next door. But he soon got tired of dabbling. He wanted to master detective work, to study it like a science—and to keep getting paid for putting on disguises.



"The local detective agency didn't have any openings at first," he recalls. "But when the supervisor heard I was a magician he was putty in my hands." During the next two years, Nickell was sent out on long undercover assignments as a tavern waiter, a steelworker, a shipping clerk, and a forklift driver. "I would infiltrate these theft rings, set them up, and bust them," he says. "And the irony was that I was a federal fugitive the whole time." By 1977, when Jimmy Carter granted draft dodgers an unconditional pardon, Nickell had known every species of con artist and true believer, even as he had learned the cost of sticking to his own beliefs. He was ready to be a paranormal investigator.

This past June, I joined Nickell at the Fourth World Skeptics Conference, in Burbank, California. It was hard to believe such gatherings exist, but the skeptics, for once, had quelled their doubts and made the pilgrimage. The Hilton convention center had three large halls devoted to sessions on creationism, urban legends, fringe psychotherapies, and other topics. Many of the speakers were eminent scientists—Marvin Minsky, a world authority on artificial intelligence, gave the keynote address—and the assembled mind power was impressive. Still, attendance was disappointing. "I can go to almost any 'Star Trek' convention and get fifty thousand people," one skeptic was heard to say. "This is the World Congress and you've only got five hundred."

I asked Ray Hyman, who is now a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Oregon, why his colleagues were so few, so old, and so predominantly white and male. He shook his head sadly. "The big question is why there are any of us at all," he said. Science is hardly a safeguard against gullibility, he added. Some of the most persuasive kooks are those who have mastered one area of research and presume to make pronouncements about another. The chemist Linus Pauling, for example, won two Nobel Prizes yet spent the last years of his life touting vitamin C as a cure-all. Humans have evolved to be a credulous species, Hyman concluded. We're dependent on social groups for our survival, and those groups tend to be based on shared beliefs. "What you have here are mavericks, genetic mutants."

Skeptics can take an almost unseemly pleasure in this characterization. In one session of the conference, a jittery British psychologist named Richard Wiseman showed a videotape of a study he had done on firewalking. Skeptics had previously demonstrated that almost anyone can cross fifteen or twenty feet of live coals without burning his feet. But Wiseman wanted to test the firewalkers' claim of a "psychic shield." He had a sixty-foot-long pit dug and filled with burning timber, swept the ash from the red-hot embers, then invited four professional firewalkers to traverse it. "To do it safely, you have to reach a state of personal empowerment," one of them told him before setting forth. "A kind of energetic change in the structure of your body that can protect you." The experiment ended, for that contestant and two others, with a mad dash to the first-aid tent, where a paramedic tended to their second-degree burns. ("I should have had a homeopath waiting in another tent," Wiseman quipped. "And then seen which tent they chose.") The fourth contestant bowed out at the last minute, saying that her guardian angel had inexplicably fled.

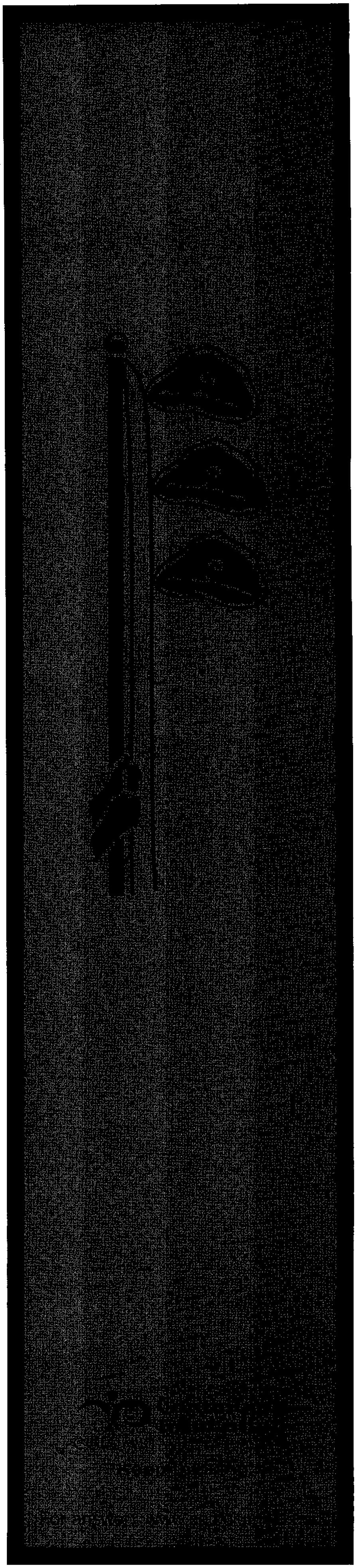
Such triumphs are rare, though. The conference was largely a tale of futility—of brave but overmatched skeptics piling up sandbags of logic to slow a never-ending tide of credulity. "It is bad, it is very bad," a Siberian skeptic told me at a cocktail party one night. The media have convinced many Russians that powerful "torsion fields" can be sent through the earth to control the brains of Americans, he said. "I wonder how they fool so many people." Next to him, a Mexican skeptic was saying that government officials in his country take seminars on how to tap into the power of angels. Peru has too many psychics, France too many aromatherapists, and the Netherlands too many fad diseases. ("It's too cloudy for U.F.O.s," a Belgian skeptic said.) When I asked an Indian skeptic what problems his country was facing, he chuckled. "Problems? In India, there are always problems," he said. "Right now, we have too many god-men. These are men who say they are gods. We have hundreds, thousands . . . " He trailed off, gazing glumly at his empty glass, then went to get another drink.

Late that night, back in my hotel room, I gave my mother a call. She's a historian and a lapsed Catholic, and I thought she might appreciate some of the stranger superstitions I'd heard. I told her about a palm reading that Ray Hyman had given me, as a demonstration of how fortune-tellers work. He had said that my left palm represents the person I was born as, the right palm the person I've become. By looking at both palms, he could tell that I had been born with a weak heart but had strengthened it through exercise.

I was about to go on when my mother interrupted. "Have you had your cholesterol checked lately?" she asked. I told her that wasn't the point, that Hyman was just guessing—he had admitted as much. But she ignored me. I had a great-aunt, she said, who went to Germany as a refugee from Romania and had a powerful sixth sense. After the war, when most of her family was starving, she made a good living reading coffee grounds for the wives of missing soldiers. My great-grandmother had a similar gift. One night during the First World War, when her son Josef was off fighting in France, she awoke to the sound of footsteps in the house. Heart-stricken, she roused her husband and told him that she had heard a ghost. "Josef is dead," she said. The Army later confirmed that he had been killed that night.

Tap the surface of almost any family history and such stories will pop out like secret compartments in an old jewelry chest. We are born believers, as Hyman said, apt to affix meaning to all our coincidences. My mother doesn't think that mediums can talk to the dead; she would never go to Lily Dale for spiritual self-help. But neither is she willing to say that psychic connections don't exist. She believes in an intuitive bond between parents and children and those of great sensitivity—a sixth sense of the vaguest sort—and in the limits of modern science to perceive it. Her stories exasperated me at first, but there was comfort in them, too, a relief from all the smug certainties of the conference.

I thought of André Kole, a magician and skeptic whom Nickell had pointed out to me earlier that day. Kole looks like a more ascetic Pat Boone, fastidiously groomed and remarkably preserved for a sixty-five-year-old. Part of the year, he lives in Arizona and designs illusions for David Copperfield; the rest of the time he travels the world, per-



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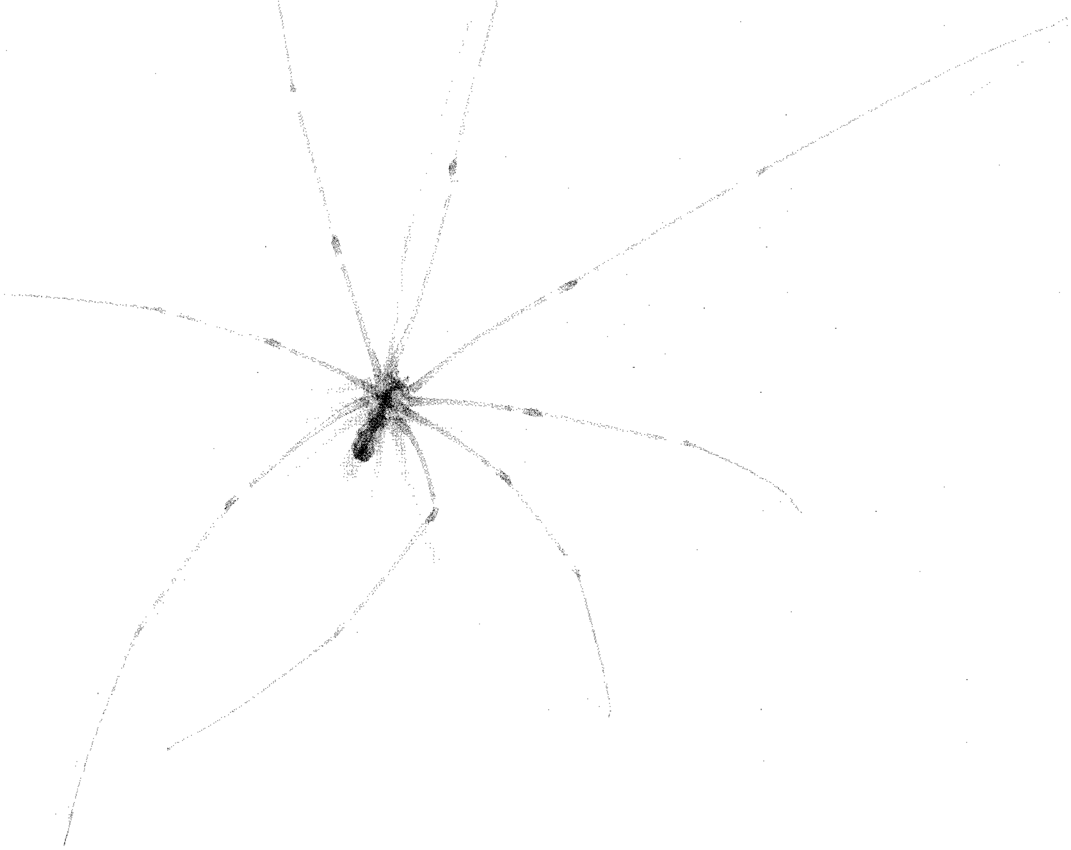

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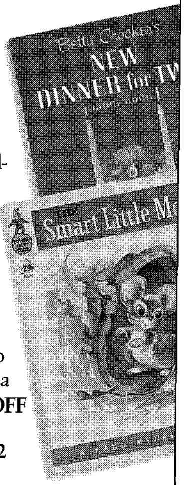

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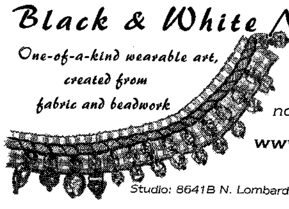

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forming his own magic and exposing the tricks of local charlatans. Kole has debunked witch doctors in Uganda, faith healers in India, and psychic surgeons in the Philippines, often to crowds of many thousands. But there's a catch. At the end of every show, he makes a pitch for the one magician whose miracles, he says, cannot be explained away: Jesus Christ.

When I asked Kole why he had come to the conference, he shrugged. "I'm kind of here incognito," he said. "All those slurs and jokes about Christianity . . . just filthy, filthy stuff." He said that the skeptics, "in spite of being humanists and atheists and agnostics," are doing the good work of exposing supernatural fraud. Then he fixed me with the same unblinking eyes that have mesmerized crowds in Calcutta. "It won't get them to Heaven, though," he said. "That's the bottom line. And what value is there in gaining the whole world if you lose your own soul?"

Hunched over a bowl of granola and yogurt in the hotel restaurant the next morning, Nickell looked tired and uneasy. I couldn't tell why at first: he was a celebrity at the conference. In the hallways and lecture rooms, grizzled old skeptics would grab his arm and shout, "Why, if it isn't Joe Nickell! The world's greatest paranormal investigator!" Nickell would smile and pass out wooden nickels with his name on them, or take business cards and make them vanish from his hand. Yet the conference was a kind of crossroads for him—an intersection of two careers, two philosophies of life, that once seemed parallel.

After returning to the United States from Canada, in 1977, Nickell tried his hand at stunt work in Los Angeles—"not one of my successes," he admits—then went to graduate school at the University of Kentucky. For his Ph.D. dissertation, he solved a number of literary mysteries, among them the disappearance of Ambrose Bierce. (Legend holds that Bierce went to Mexico and never came back. Nickell argued that the author committed suicide in a canyon along the Colorado River, using a German revolver that he had long carried for that purpose.) He soon found, though, that English departments had little need for a literary detective, much less a paranormal investigator.

For the next twenty years, Nickell did his best to scratch a livelihood from his obscure fields of expertise. During the school year, he took adjunct teaching jobs at the university; in the summer, he investigated the paranormal and wrote books about what he found. It was too shaky and peripatetic a life to allow for marriage, he says. "My first one ended in divorce, and I like to think that I learn from my mistakes." But he did eventually find companionship of a sort. In 1983, Paul Kurtz published Nickell's work on the Shroud of Turin and invited him to join CSICOP. Twelve years later, Kurtz persuaded Nickell to move to Buffalo and join the committee full time.

"When the history of the twentieth century is written, I think Joe will emerge as the leading critic of the empirical claims of religion," Kurtz told me. Yet Nickell has begun to feel like a heretic of late. Under Kurtz's leadership, the skeptics' movement has made secular humanism its high church—the new creed to supplant all those which logic tears down. "My mission is the mission of Socrates: to bring reason into the public arena," Kurtz says. "Islam and Judaism and Christianity are false."

Nickell would rather leave his options open. A few years ago, he told me, he went to a skeptics' conference in La Coruña, Spain. He was walking down some stairs one afternoon, not long after investigating the statue of a local saint, which was said to protect those who embrace it, when his left leg suddenly crumpled beneath him. "It wasn't like I fell and broke my leg," he said. "It was more like I broke my leg and fell." The other skeptics gathered around as he writhed in agony. When he told them, between gasps, that he thought he had broken his leg, they were dubious. "You know, that might just be a sprain," one of them suggested. Another told him to try wiggling his toes. It wasn't until Nickell lifted his leg, revealing that it was bent at a grotesque angle to his foot, that they believed him.

"What we need is a kinder, gentler skepticism," Nickell said. "I'm tired of these debunkers coming by my office and saying, 'Hey, Nickell, seen any ghosts lately? Har har har.' " He shook his head and poked at his granola. "I'm not saying there's a fifty-fifty chance that there is a ghost in that haunted house. I think the chances are closer to 99.9 per cent that there isn't. But let's go look. We might learn something interesting as hell."

That afternoon, during his talk on paranormal investigations, Nickell showed a slide of a short, skinny man in a gray fedora: Melvin (Nervous) Purvis, the F.B.I. investigator who put away John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd. It seemed an odd detour for a talk on the paranormal, but Nickell's presentation was largely autobiographical, and he appeared to feel a deep kinship with the man. At the height of his fame, Purvis was consigned to a desk job by J. Edgar Hoover, who couldn't bear to share the agency's limelight. Nickell, too, is responsible for his organization's greatest coups, yet some skeptics say that his work is an exercise in futility: for every superstition he lops off, two new ones crop up.

"I've spent thirty years investigating the paranormal," Nickell told the crowd, "and I kind of resent this idea that I've been wasting my time." He let the words ring in the hall for a while, until you could hear the microphone hum. And, for a brief, tense moment, the old fire was in his eyes again, the barroom brawler rising to a challenge. Then he smiled quickly and went on with the show.

When Nickell was a boy, his grandmother used to send him letters from Santa Claus, smeared with soot to suggest that they had come down the chimney. By the time he finally uncovered the ruse ("It was my introduction to forensic science"), his friends had been wise to Santa for years. It's hard not to think that the experience shaped his career, and he has never quite managed to shake Santa Claus off. Cynics and sentimentalists say that Nickell is nothing but a spoilsport, that he's like the older kid on the playground, telling the kindergartners that Santa doesn't exist. Humanists take the opposite tack. How many chimneys do you have to go up, they say, before you're con-

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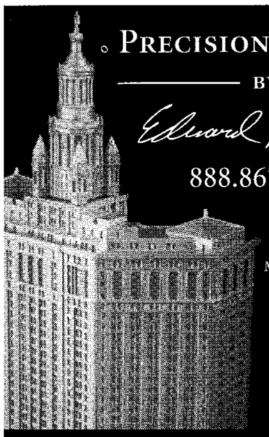

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vinced that there's no one on the roof?

"You don't work as a skeptic this long without getting hate mail from all quarters," Nickell told me one afternoon. "When I published my book on the Shroud of Turin, I had people who wanted me tortured and put to death." We were standing in the archives of the Museum of the City of New York, flanked by rows of gray flat-file cabinets. On the table in front of us was a yellowed sheet of paper covered in primly elegant script. It was an epistolary poem written by the nineteenth-century author and theologian Clement Clarke Moore, but it could well have come from Nickell's own grandmother. It was called "From Saint Nicholas."

Two years ago, a Vassar English professor and literary sleuth named Don Foster created a mild stir by arguing that Moore was a fraud. Moore's most famous poem, "The Night Before Christmas," was first published anonymously, in 1823. Though Moore eventually took credit for it, in 1844, Foster claimed that the real author was another nineteenth-century poet, Henry Livingston, Jr. The style and diction of the poem were typical of Livingston's work, but not of Moore's, Foster said. Besides, he explained, Moore was too much of a curmudgeon to have written so large-hearted a poem.

Foster had become well known, by then, for unmasking Joe Klein as the anonymous author of "Primary Colors." The *Times* ran a story about his work on Moore, but Nickell was less than impressed. "It's laughable, just laughable," he said. During the preceding months, at the urging of a collector named Seth Kaller, he had reinvestigated the Moore case, turning up historical and textual evidence to contradict nearly every claim that Foster made. (His findings are being published by the scholarly journal *Manuscripts*.) "From Saint Nicholas" was the smoking gun, he said. He had found it buried among the other papers in the museum's Moore archives. It was clearly written in Moore's hand, yet it had never been published. More important, it seemed to have been written in 1821—a year before Moore said he composed "The Night Before Christmas." Apparently, the country's most famous poem had a prequel.

Nickell removed a small loupe from his inside coat pocket and peered at the manuscript's hand-painted border. Document research is mostly a sideline for him now, but there is something about it that sustains him. In recent years, he has helped assemble forensic teams that have exposed the Jack the Ripper diaries as frauds and found evidence that John Demjanjuk was a Nazi war criminal. Most of a skeptic's victories are inherently anticlimactic. No matter how clever the proof, the result is to replace the fantastic with the ordinary. But in documents there are mysteries whose solutions can actually lead to happy endings—to beliefs restored, manuscripts authenticated, reputations redeemed.

Nickell held the poem at arm's length and grinned, savoring the moment. "This is all the evidence I need," he said. Then he began to read aloud:

From Saint Nicholas

What! My sweet little Sis, in bed all alone;
No light in your room! and your nursy too gone!
And you, like a good child, are quietly lying,
While some naughty ones would be fretting or crying?
Well, for this you must have something pretty, my dear;
And, I hope, will deserve a reward too next year.
But, speaking of crying, I'm sorry to say
Your screeches and screams, so loud ev'ry day,
Were near driving me and my goodies away.
Good children I always give good things in plenty;
How sad to have left your stocking quite empty:
But you are beginning so nicely to spell,
And, in going to bed, behave always so well,
That, although I too oft see the tear in your eye,
I cannot resolve to pass you quite by.
I hope, when I come here again the next year,
I shall not see even the sign of a tear.
And then, if you get back your sweet pleasant looks,
And do as you're bid, I will leave you some books,
Some toys, or perhaps what you still may like better,
And then too may write you a prettier letter.
At present, my dear, I must bid you good bye;
Now, do as you're bid; and, remember, don't cry.

It was a strange little poem, equal parts sweet and sour. Its author had almost certainly written "The Night Before Christmas"—the diction, metre, topic, and date of composition were too close to be coincidental. Yet he seemed every bit the curmudgeon that Foster had claimed he was. When I mentioned this to Nickell, he was genuinely surprised. "This isn't the work of a mean-spirited person," he said. "Look, he's taken the time to compose this little moral lesson, to write out a fair copy. This is a loving thing." To Nickell, all the faults I had imagined were virtues in disguise. The man who had written this poem may have dashed a little girl's dreams, but he was careful to explain why. He was a spoilsport with only the best intentions, a saint who performed no miracles but who didn't discount the possibility, however faint, that miracles might occur in the future.

He was a Santa Claus after a skeptic's own heart. ♦

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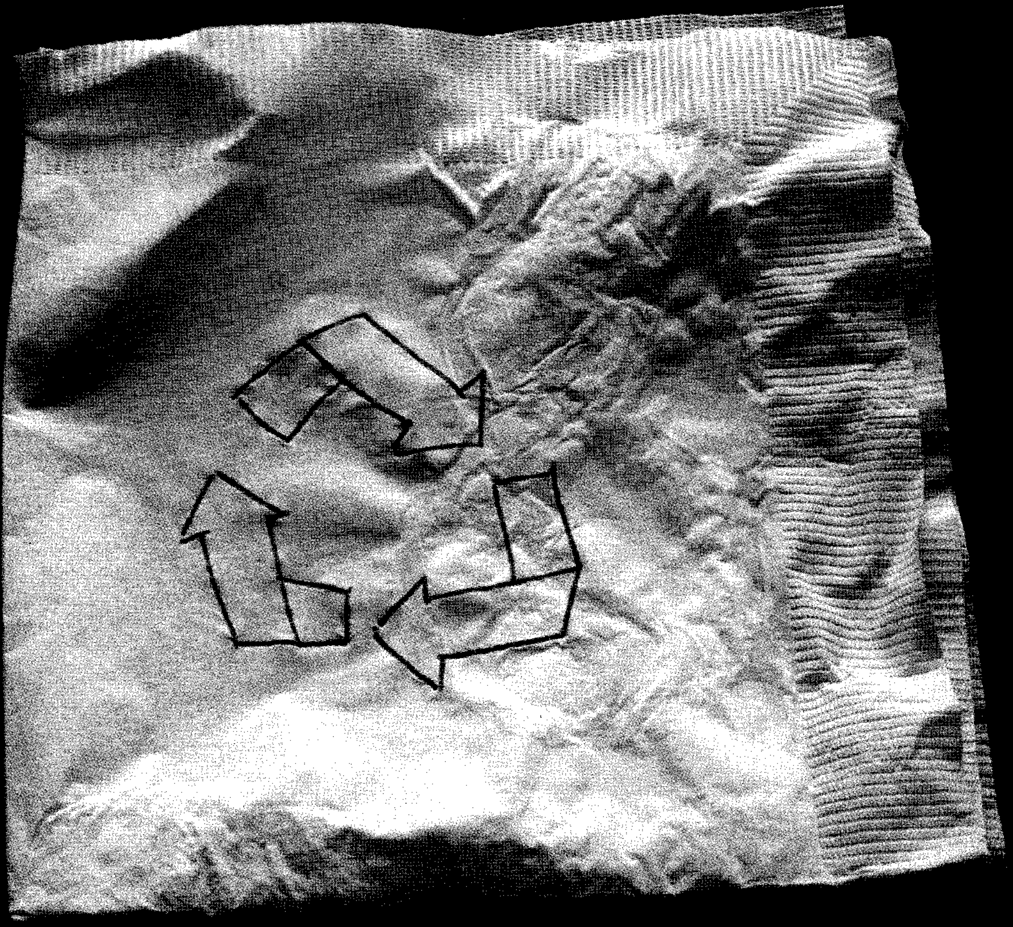

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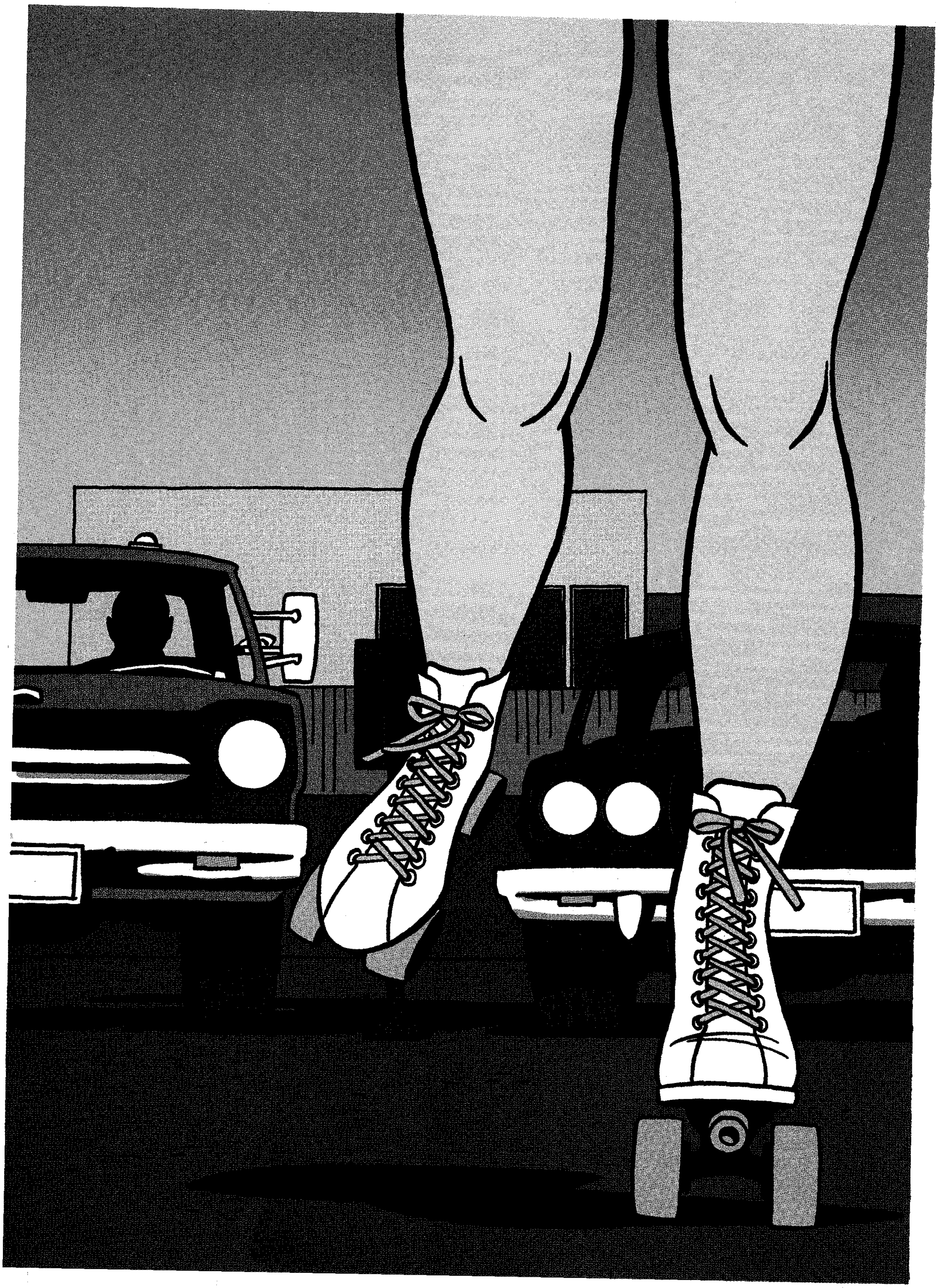
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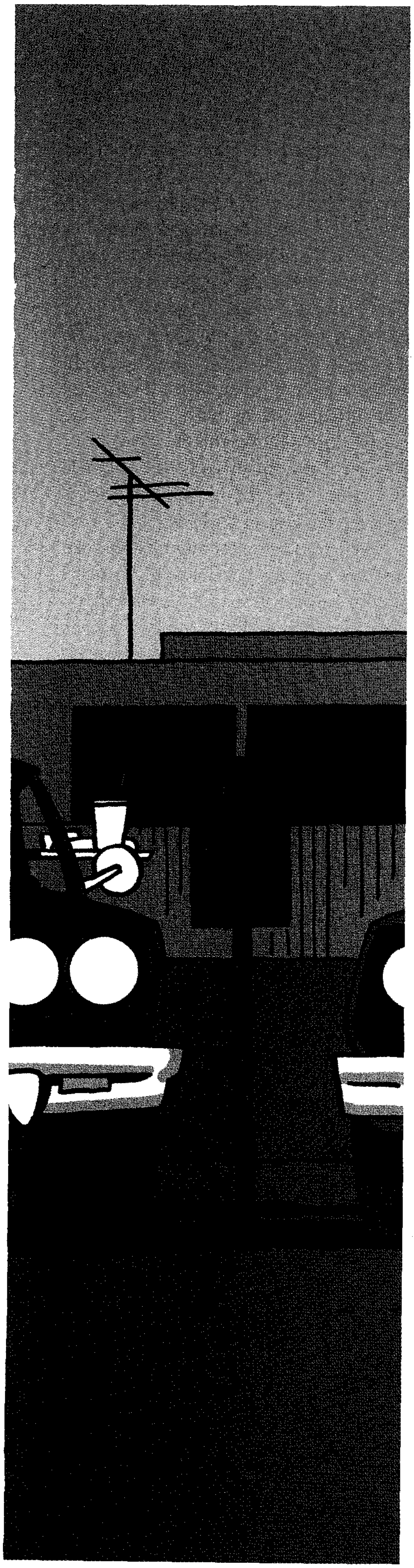


FICTION

JOLENE: A LIFE

BY E. L. DOCTOROW

She married Mickey Holler when she was fifteen. Married him to get out of her latest foster home, where her so-called dad used to fool with her, get her to hold him, things like that. Even before her menses started. And her foster mom liked to slap her up the head for no reason. Or for every reason. So she married Mickey. And he loved her—that was a plus. She had never had that experience before. It made her look at herself in the mirror and do things with her hair. He was twenty, Mickey. Real name Mervin. He was a sweet boy, if without very much upstairs, as she knew even from their first date. He had a heel that didn't touch the ground and weak eyes, but he was not the kind to lay a hand on a woman. And she could tell him what she wanted, like a movie or a grilled-cheese sandwich and a chocolate shake, and it became his purpose in life. He loved her, he really did, even if he didn't know much about it.

But, anyway, she was out of the house now, and wearing a wedding ring to Jeff Davis High. Some of the boys said smutty things, but the girls looked upon her with a new respect.

Mickey's Uncle Phil had come to the justice of the peace with them, to be best man. After the ceremony he grinned and said, Welcome to our family, Jolene, honey, and gave her a big hug that lasted a mite too long. Uncle Phil was like a father to Mickey and employed him to drive one of the trucks in his home-oil-delivery business. Mickey Holler was almost an orphan. His real father was in the state penitentiary with no parole, for the same reason that his mother was in the burial ground behind the First Baptist Church. Jolene asked Mickey, as she thought permissible now that she was a relation, what his mother had done to deserve her fate. But he got all flustered when he tried to talk about it. It happened when he was only twelve. She was left to gather for herself that his father was a crazy drunk who had done bad things even before this happened. But, anyway, that was why Jolene was living now with Mickey under the same roof with his Uncle Phil and Aunt Kay.

Aunt Kay was real smart. She was an assistant manager in the Southern People's Bank across the square from the courthouse. So, between her and Uncle Phil's oil business, they had a nice ranch house with a garden out back and a picnic table and two hammocks between the trees.

Jolene liked the room she and Mickey occupied, though it looked into the driveway, and she had all she could do to keep it nice, with Mickey dropping his greasy coveralls on the floor. But she understood the double obligations of being a wife and an unpaying boarder besides. As she was home from school before anyone finished his job for the day, she tried to make herself useful. She would have an hour or so to do some of her homework and then she would go into the kitchen and put up something for everyone's dinner.

Jolene had always liked school—she felt at home there. Her favorite subject was art. She had been drawing from the time she was in third grade, when the class had done a mural of the Battle of Gettysburg and she drew more of it than anyone. She couldn't do much art now at this time in her life as a married woman, not being just for herself anymore. But she still noticed things. She was someone who had an eye for what wants to be drawn. Mickey had a white hairless chest with a collarbone that stood out across from shoulder to shoulder like he was someone's beast of burden. And a long neck and a backbone that she could use to do sums. He surely did love her—he cried sometimes he loved her so much—but that was all. She had a sixteenth birthday and he bought her a negligee he'd picked out himself at Berman's department store. It was three sizes too big. Jolene could take it back for exchange, of course, but she had the unsettling thought that as Mickey's wife all that would happen in her life to come was she would grow into something that size. He liked to watch her doing her homework, which made her realize he had no ambition for himself, Mickey Holler. He would never run a business and play golf on the weekend like Uncle Phil. He was a day-to-day person. He did not ever talk about buying his own home, or moving toward anything that would make things different for them than they were now. She could think this of him even though she liked to kiss his pale chest and run her fingers over the humps of his backbone.

Uncle Phil was tall with a good strong jaw and a head of shining black hair he combed in a kind of wave, and he had dark meaningful eyes and a deep voice, and he joked around with a lot of self-assurance—oh, he was a man, of that there was no doubt. At first it made Jolene nervous when he would eye her up and down. Or he would sing a line from a famous love song to her. *You are so beautiful to me-e!* And then he would laugh to let her know it was all just the same horsing around as he was accustomed to doing. He was tanned from being out on the county golf course, and even the slight belly he had on him under his knit shirt seemed just right. The main thing about him was that he enjoyed his life, and he was popular; they had their social set, though you could see most of their friends came through him.

Aunt Kay was not exactly the opposite of Uncle Phil, but she was the one who attended to business. She was a proper sort who never sat back with her shoes off, and, though kind and correct as far as Jolene was concerned, clearly would have preferred to have her home to herself now that Mickey had someone to take care of him. Jolene knew this—she didn't have to be told. She could work her fingers to the bone and Aunt Kay would still never love her. Aunt Kay was a Yankee and had come to live in the South because of a job offer. She and Uncle Phil had been married fifteen years. She called him Philip, which Jolene thought was putting on airs. She wore suits and panty hose, always, and blouses with collars buttoned to the neck. She was no beauty, but you could see what had interested Phil—her very light blue, icy eyes, maybe, and naturally blond hair, and she had a generous figure that required a panty girdle, which she was never without.

But now Uncle Phil got in the habit of waking them up in the morning, coming into their room without knocking and saying in his deep voice, Time for work, Mickey Holler! but looking at Jolene in the meantime as she pulled the covers up to her chin.

She knew the man was doing something he shouldn't be doing with that wake-up routine and it made her angry but she didn't know what she could do about it. Mickey seemed blind to the fact that his own uncle, his late mother's brother, had an eye for her. At the same time, she was excited to have been noticed by this man of the world. She knew that as a handsome smiling fellow with white teeth Phil would be quite aware of his effect on women, so she made a point of seeming to be oblivious of him as anything but her husband's uncle and employer. But this became more and more difficult, living in the same house with him. She found herself thinking about him. In her mind Jolene made up a story: how gradually, over time, it would become apparent that she and Uncle Phil were meant for each other. How an understanding would arise between them and go on for some years until, possibly, Aunt Kay died, or left him—it wasn't all that clear in Jolene's mind.

But Uncle Phil was not one for dreaming. One afternoon she was scrubbing their kitchen floor for them, down on her knees in her shorts with her rump up in the air, and he had come home early, in that being his own boss he could come and go as he liked. She was humming "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and didn't hear him.

He stood in the door watching how the scrubbing motion was rendered on her behind, and no sooner did she realize she was not alone than he was lifting her from the waist in her same kneeling position and carrying her that way into his bedroom, the scrub brush still in her hand.

That night in her own bed she could still smell Uncle Phil's aftershave lotion and feel the little cotton balls of their chenille bedspread in the grasp of her fingers. She was too sore even for Mickey's fumblings.

And that was the beginning. In all Jolene's young life, she had never been to where she couldn't wait to see someone. She tried to contain herself, but her schoolwork began to fall off, though she had always been a conscientious student, even if not the smartest brain in her class. But it was that way with Phil, too—it was so intense and constant that he was no longer laughing. It was more like they were equals in their magnetic attraction. They just couldn't get enough. It was every day, always while Aunt Kay was putting up her numbers in the Southern People's Bank and Mickey, poor Mickey, was riding his oil route as Uncle Phil devised it to the furthermost reaches of the town line and beyond.

Well, the passion between people can never be anything but drawn to a conclusion by the lawful spouses around them, and after a month or two of this everyone knew it, and the crisis came banging open the bedroom door shouting her name, and all at once Mickey was riding Phil's back like a monkey, beating him about the head and crying all the while, and Phil, in his skivvies, with Mickey pounding him, staggered around the combined living-and-dining room till he backpedalled the poor boy up against their big TV and smashed him through the screen. Jolene, in her later reflections, when she had nothing in the world to do but pass the time, remembered everything—she remembered the bursting sound of the TV glass, she remembered how surprised she was to see how skinny Phil's legs were, and that the sun through the blinds was so bright because daylight-saving had come along unbeknownst to the lovers, which was why the working people had got home before they were supposed to. But at the time there was no leisure for thought. Aunt Kay was dragging her by the hair through the hall over the shag carpet and into the kitchen, across the fake-tile flooring, and she was out the kitchen door, kicked down the back steps, and thrown out like someone's damn cat and yowling like one, too.

Jolene waited out there by the edge of the property, crouching in the bushes in her shift with her arms folded across her breasts. She waited for Phil to come out and take her away, but he never did. Mickey was the one who opened the door. He stood there looking at her in the quiet

AFTER THE RAIN

After the rain the puddles are blue.
As St. Theresa said of Grace:
"There are little pools for children,
there are pools for all,
some large, some small."

The school-house in its gritty playground,
built of cement-blocks, stained with rain,
is turreted, and crenellated,
a two-dimensional
cardboard castle

where little captives, like fair ladies
mirror-charmed, gaze into blackboards.

—Elizabeth Bishop
(Key West, 1942)

outside, while from the house they listened to the shouting and the sound of things breaking. Mickey's hair was sticking up and his glasses were bent broken across his nose. Jolene called to him. She was crying; she wanted him to forgive her and tell her it was all right. But what he did, her Mickey, he got in his pickup in his bloody shirt and drove away. That was what Jolene came to think of as the end of Chapter 1 in her life story, because where Mickey drove to was the middle of the Catawba River bridge, and there he stopped and with the engine still running he jumped off into that rocky river and killed himself.

More than one neighbor must have seen her wandering the streets, and by and by a police cruiser picked her up, and first she was taken to the emergency room, where it was noted that her vital signs were O.K., though they showed her where a clump of her red hair had been pulled out. Then she was put into a motel off the interstate while the system figured out what to do with her. She was a home wrecker but also a widow but also a juvenile with no living relatives. The fosters she had left to marry Mickey would take no responsibility for her. Time passed. She watched soaps. She cried. A matron was keeping an eye on her morning and night. Then a psychiatrist who worked for the county came to interview her. A day after that, she was driven to a court hearing with testimony by this county psychiatrist she had told her story to in all honesty, and that was something that embittered her as the double cross of all time, because on his recommendation she was remanded to the juvenile loony bin until such time as she was to become a reasonable adult able to take care of herself.

Well, so there she was, moping about on their pills, half asleep for most of the day and night, and of course, as she quickly learned, this was no place to regain her sanity, if she had ever lost it in the first place, which she knew just by looking at who else was there that she hadn't. About two months into the hell there, they one morning took off her usual gray hanging frock and put her in a recognizable dark dress, though a size too big, and fixed her hair with a barrette and drove her in a van to the courthouse once again, though this time it was for her testimony as to her relations with Uncle Phil, who was there at the defense table looking awful. She didn't know what was different about him till she realized his hair was without lustre and, in fact, gray. Then she knew that all this time she had been so impressed he had been dyeing it. He was hunched over from the fix he was in and he never looked at her, this man of the world. A little of the old feeling arose in her and she was angry with herself but she couldn't help it. She waited for some acknowledgment, but it never came. What it was, Aunt Kay had kicked him out, he was sleeping in his office, his business had gone down the tubes, and none of his buddies would play golf with him anymore.

Jolene was called upon to show the judge that she was, at sixteen, underage for such doings, which made Phil a statutory rapist. There was a nice legal argument for just a minute or two as to how she was a married woman at the time, an adulteress, in fact, and certainly not unknowing in the ways of carnal life, but that didn't hold water, apparently. She was excused and taken back to the loony bin and put back in her hanging gray frock and slippers, and that was it for the real world. She heard that Phil pulled eighteen months in the state prison. She couldn't sympathize, being in one of her own.

Jolene didn't think much about Mickey, but she drew his face over and over. She drew headstones in a graveyard and then drew his face on the gravestones. This seemed to her a worthy artistic task. The more she drew of Mickey the more she remembered the details of how he looked at her on the last evening of his life, but it was hard with just crayons—they would only give her crayons to draw with, not the colored pencils she asked for.

Then something good happened. One of the girls in the ward smashed the mirror over the sink in the bathroom and used a sliver of it to cut her wrists. Well, that, of course, wasn't good, but all the mirrors in the bathroom were removed and nobody could see herself, except maybe, if they stood on the bed and the sunlight was in the right place, in the windows behind the mesh screen. So Jolene began a business in portraits. She drew a girl's face, and soon they were waiting in line to have her draw them. If they didn't have a mirror, they had Jolene. Some of her likenesses were not very good, but since in most cases they were a lot better than the originals, nobody minded. Mrs. Molloy, the head nurse, thought that this was good therapy for everyone, and so Jolene was given a set of watercolors with three brushes, and a big thick sketch pad, and when the rage for portraits had played itself out she painted everything else—the ward, the game room, the yard where they walked, the flowers in the flower bed, the sunset through the black mesh, everything.

But since she was as sane as anyone, she was more and more desperate to get out of there. After a year or so, she made the best deal she could, with one of the night attendants—a sharp-faced woman, sallow in coloring but decent and roughly kind to people, name of Cindy. Jolene thought that Cindy, with the leathery lines in her face, might be no less than fifty years old. Cindy had an eye for Jolene right from the beginning. She gave her cigarettes to smoke outside behind the garbage bins, and she knew hair and makeup. She said, Red—Jolene had what they call strawberry hair, so that, of course, was her nickname—Red, you don't want to cover up those freckles. They are charming in a girl like you, they give your face a sunlight. And see, if you keep pulling back your hair into ponytails your hairline will recede, so we'll cut it just a bit shorter, so that it curls up as it wants to, and we let it frame your sweet face and, lo and behold, you are as pretty as a picture.

Cindy liked the freckles on Jolene's breasts, too, and it wasn't too bad being loved up by a woman. It was not her first choice, but Jolene thought, Once you get going, it doesn't matter who it is or what they've got—there is the same panic, after all, and we are blind at such moments. But, anyway, that was the deal, and in order to get herself out of the loony bin she agreed to live with Cindy in her own home, where she would cuddle secretly like her love child, until she could escape from there as well. With just a couple of clicks of door locks and some minutes of hiding in a supply closet, and then with more keys turning and a creak of gates, Jolene rode to freedom in the trunk of Cindy's beat-up Corolla. It was even easier, after one night, walking out Cindy's front door in broad daylight once the woman had gone back to work.

Jolene hit the road. She wanted out of that town and out of that county however she could. She had almost a hundred dollars from her watercolor business. She hitched some, and rode some local buses. She had a small suitcase and a lot of attitude to get her safe across state lines. She worked in a five-and-ten in Lexington and in an industrial laundry in Memphis. There was always a Y.W.C.A., to stay out of trouble. And while she did have to take a deep breath and sell it once or twice across the country, it had the virtue of hardening her up for her own protection. She was just seventeen by then, but carrying herself with some new clothes like she was ten years older, so that nobody would know there was just this scared girl-child inside the hip-slinger with the platform strap shoes.

Which brought her to Phoenix, Arizona, a hot, flat city in the desert, but with a lot of fast-moving people who lived inside their air-conditioning.

She appreciated that in the West human society was less tight-assed, nobody cared that much what you did or who your parents were and most everyone you met came from somewhere else. Before long, she was working at a Dairy Queen and had a best friend, Kendra, who was one of her roommates, a Northern girl from Akron, Ohio.

The Dairy Queen was at the edge of city life with a view over warehouses to the flat desert with its straight roads and brownish mountains away in the distance. She had to revert back to her real age to get this job. It involved roller-skating, a skill which she fortunately had not forgotten. You skated out to the customers with their order on a tray that you hooked to the car window. It was only minimum, but some men would give you a good tip, though women never did. And, anyway, that wasn't to last long, because this cute guy kept coming around every day. He had long hair, a scraggly lip beard, and a ring in his ear—he looked like a rock star. He wore an undershirt with his jeans and boots, so you could see the tattoos that went up and down his arms, across his shoulders, and onto his chest. He even had a guitar in the back of his 1965 plum-color Caddy convertible. Of course she ignored his entreaties, though he kept coming back, and if another girl waited on him he asked her where Jolene was. All the girls wore nametags, you see. One day, he drove up, and when she came back with his order he was sitting on the top of the front seat with a big smile, though a front tooth was missing. He strummed his guitar and he said, Listen to this, Jolene, and he sang this song he had made up, and as he sang he laughed in appreciation, as if someone else was singing.

Jolene, Jolene
She is so mean
She won't be seen with me
At the Dairy Queen.
Jolene, Jolene
Please don't be mean
Your name it means to me
My love you'll glean from me
I am so keen to see
How happy we will be
When you are one with me
Jolene, Jolene
My Dairy Queen.

Well, she knew he was a sly one, but he'd gone to the trouble of thinking it up, didn't he? The people in the next car laughed and applauded, and she blushed right through her freckles, but she couldn't help laughing along with them. And, of course, with his voice not very good and his guitar not quite in tune, she knew he was no rock star, but he was loud and didn't mind making a fool of himself, and she liked that.

In fact, the guy was by profession a tattoo artist. His name was Coco Leger, pronounced Lerjay. He was originally from New Orleans, and she did go out dancing with him the next Saturday, though her friend Kendra strongly advised against it. The guy is a sleaze, Kendra said. Jolene thought she might be right. On the other hand, Kendra had no boyfriend of her own at the moment. And she was critical about most everything, their jobs, what she ate, the movies they saw, the furniture that came with the rental apartment, and maybe even the city of Phoenix in its entirety.

But Jolene went on the date and Coco was almost a gentleman. He was a good disco dancer, though a bit of a showoff with all his pelvic moves, and what was the harm, after all? Coco Leger made her laugh, and she hadn't had a reason to laugh in a long time.

One thing led to another. There was first a small heart to be embossed for free on her behind, and before long she was working as an apprentice at Coco's Institute of Body Art. He showed her how to go about things, and she caught on quick and eventually she got to doing customers who wanted the cheap stock tattoos. It was drawing with a needle, a slow process like using only the tip of your paintbrush one dab at a time. Coco was very impressed with how fast she learned. He said she was a real asset. He fired the woman who worked for him, and after a serious discussion Jolene agreed to move in with him, in the two rooms above his store, or studio, as he called it.

Kendra, who was still at the Dairy Queen, sat and watched her pack her things. I can see what he sees in you, Jolene, she said. You've got a trim little figure and everything moves the way it should without your even trying. Thank you, Kendra. Your skin is so fair, Kendra said. And you've got that nose that turns up and a killer smile. Thank you, Kendra, she said again, and gave her a hug because, though she was happy for herself, she was sad for Kendra, whose really pretty face would not be seen for what it was by most men in that she was a heavyset girl with fat on her shoulders who was not very graceful on skates. But, Kendra continued, I can't see what you see in him. This is a man born to betray.

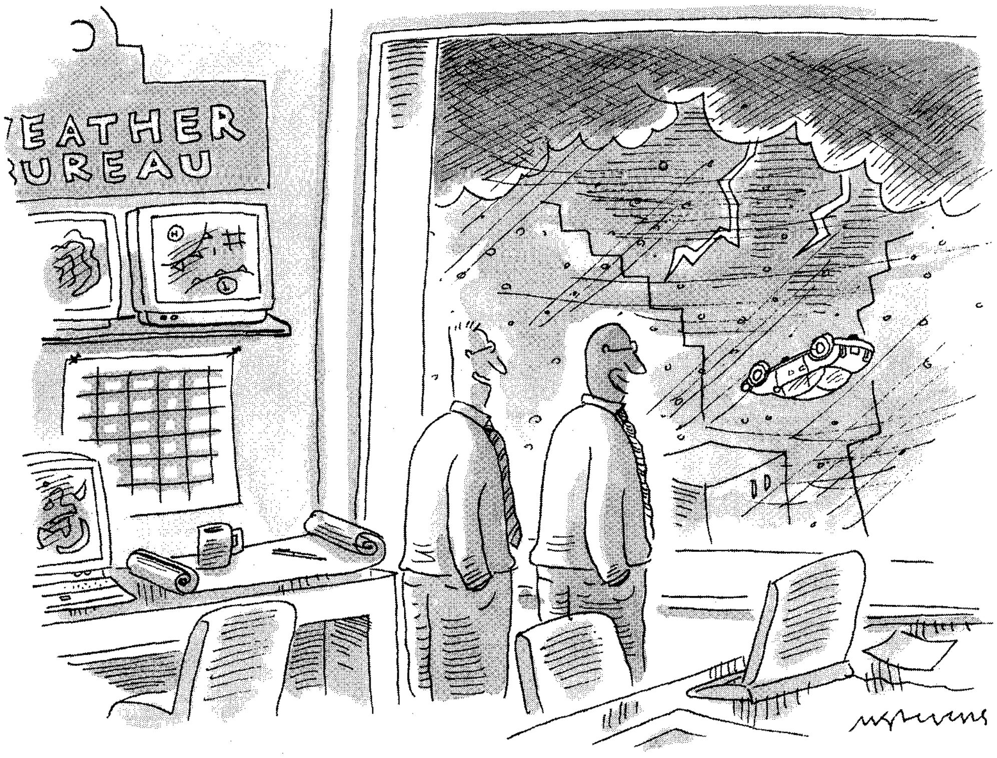
Still, she didn't want to go back to skating for tips. Coco was teaching her a trade that suited her talents. But when, after just a couple of weeks, Coco decided they should get married, she admitted to herself she knew nothing about him, his past, his family. She knew nothing, and when she asked he just laughed and said, Babe, I am an orphan in the storm, just like you. They didn't like me much where I come from, but as I understand it neither of us has a past to write home about, he said, holding her and kissing her neck. What counts is this moment here, he whispered, and the future moments to come.

She said the name Jolene Leger, pronounced Lerjay, secretly to herself and thought it had a nice lilt to it. And so after another justice of the peace and a corsage in her hand and a flowered dress to her ankles and a bottle of champagne, she was in fact Jolene Leger, a married woman once again. They went back to the two rooms above the store and smoked dope and made love, with Coco singsonging to her in her rhythm *Jolene Jolene she's a love machine*, and after he fell asleep and began to snore she got up and stood at the window and looked out on the street. It was three in the morning by then, but all the street lights were on and the traffic signals were going, though not a human being was in sight. It was all busyness on that empty street in its silence, all the store signs blazing away, the neon colors in the windows, the laundromat, the check-cashing store, the one-hour photo and passport, the newsdealer, the coffee shop, and the dry cleaner, and the parking meters looking made of gold under the amber light of the street lamps. It was the world going on as if people were the last thing it needed or wanted.

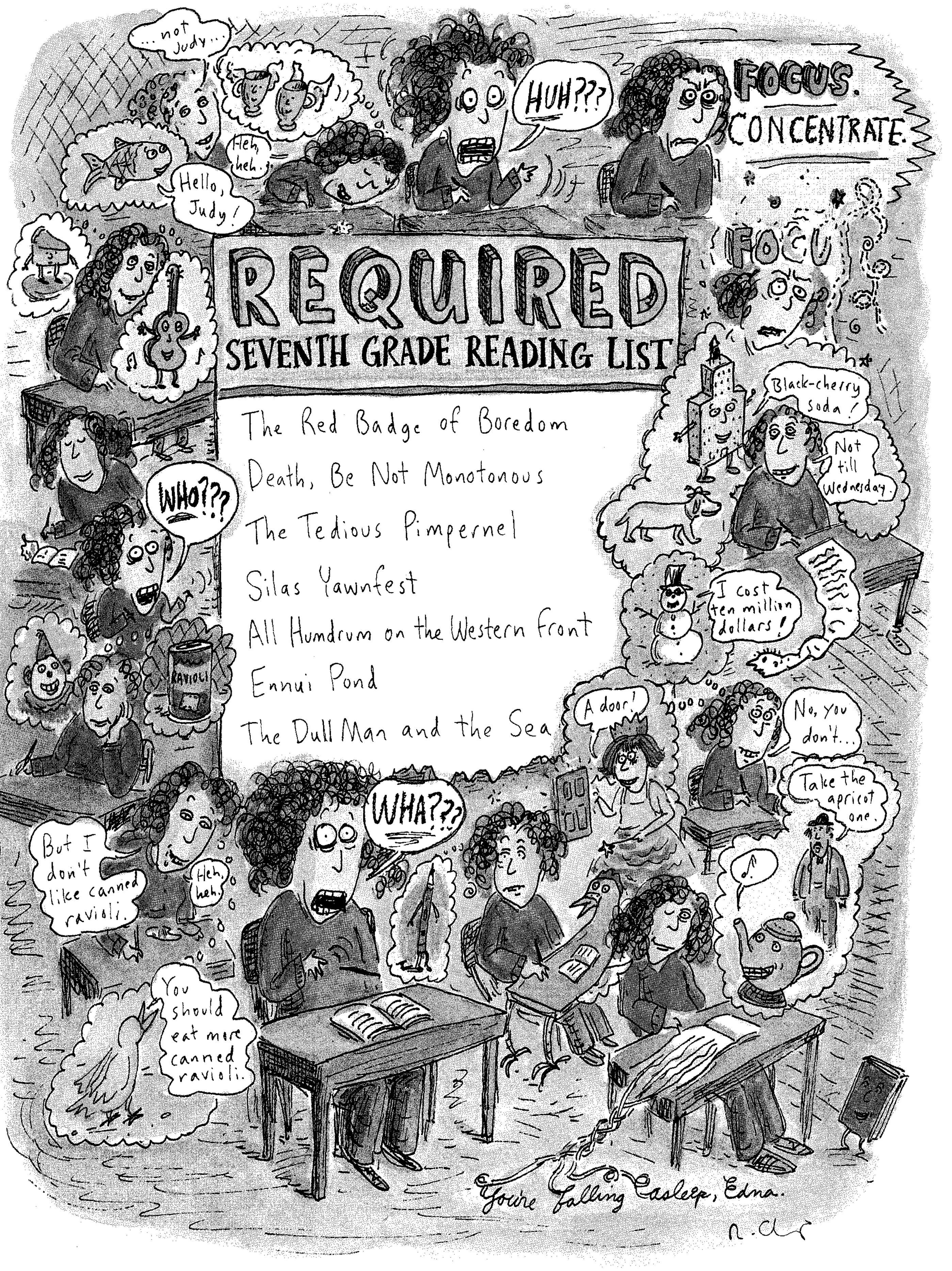
She found herself thinking that if you shaved off Coco's scraggly lip beard and if his tattoos could be scrubbed away and you took off his boots with the lifts in them and got him a haircut and maybe set a pair of eyeglasses on his nose, he would look not unlike her first husband, the late Mickey Holler, and she began to cry.

For a while, she was sympathetic to Coco's ways and wanted to believe his stories. But it became more and more difficult. He was away in his damn car half the time, leaving her to man the shop as if he didn't care what business they lost. He kept all the moneys to himself. She realized she was working without a salary, which only a wife would do. Who else would stand for that? It was a kind of slavery, wasn't it? Which is what Kendra said, tactlessly, when she came to visit. Coco was critical of almost everything Jolene did or said. And when she needed money for groceries or some such, he would only reluctantly peel off a bill or two from his carefully hoarded wad. She began to wonder where he got all his cash—certainly not from the tattooing trade, which was not all that great once the dry, cold Arizona winter set in. And when a reasonable-looking woman did come in he carried on saying all sorts of suggestive things as if they were the only two people in the room. I really don't like that, Jolene told him. Not at all. You married yourself a good-lookin' stud, Coco said. Get used to it. And when Jolene found herself doing a snake or a whiskered fish for some muscleman, and—as you'd expect, working so close up—he'd come on to her, all Coco would say when she complained was, That's what makes the world go roun'. She became miserable on a daily basis. The drugs he was dealing took up more and more of his time, and when she confronted him he didn't deny it. In fact, he said, it was the only way to keep the shop going. You should know without I have to tell you, Jolene, no artist in this U.S.A. can make it he don't have somethin' on the side.

One day, a taxicab pulled up and a woman carrying a baby and holding a valise came into the store. She was a blonde, very tall, statuesque even, and although the sign was clearly printed on the store window, she said, Is this the Institute of Body Art of which Coco Leger



"When we're right, we're right."


...not Judy...
Heh, heh.
Hello, Judy!
HUH???
FOCUS.
CONCENTRATE.
FOCU
REQUIRED
SEVENTH GRADE READING LIST
The Red Badge of Boredom
Death, Be Not Monotonous
The Tedious Pimpernel
Silas Yawnfest
All Humdrum on the Western Front
Ennui Pond
The Dull Man and the Sea
WHO???
Black-cherry soda!
Not till Wednesday.
RAVIOLI
I cost ten million dollars!
A door!
No, you don't...
Take the apricot one.
WHA???
But I don't like canned ravioli.
Heh, heh.
You should eat more canned ravioli.

You're falling asleep, Edna.

is the proprietor? Jolene nodded. I would like to see him, please, the woman said, putting the valise down and shifting the baby from one arm to the other. She looked about thirty or thirty-five, and she was wearing a hat and had just a linen jacket and a yellow dress with hose and shoes, which was most unusual on this winter day in Phoenix, or in any season of the year, for that matter, where you didn't see anyone who wasn't wearing jeans. Jolene had the weirdest feeling come over her. She felt that she was a child again. She was back in childhood, she'd only been a pretend adult and was not Mrs. Coco Leger except in her stupid dreams. It was a premonition. She looked again at the baby, and at that moment knew what she didn't have to be told—its ancestry was written all over its runty face. All it lacked was a little lip beard.

And you are? Jolene asked. I am Marin Leger, the wife of that fucking son of a bitch, the woman said. As if any confirmation was needed, her large hand coming around from under the baby's bottom had a gold band impressed into the flesh of its fourth finger.

I have spent every cent I had tracking him down and I want to see him now, this very instant, the woman said. A moment later, as if a powerful magic had been invoked, Coco's Caddy rolled to the curb, and it may have been worth everything to see the stunned expression on his face as he got out of the car and both saw Marin Leger and was seen by her through the shopwindow. But, being Coco, he recovered nicely. His face lit up, and he waved as if he couldn't have been more delighted, and came through the door with a grin. Looka this, he said. Will ya looka this! he said, his arms spread wide. Because she was the taller of the two, the hug he gave her mashed his face against the baby in her arms, who commenced to cry loudly. And as Coco stepped back he suffered the free hand of the woman smartly against his cheek.

Now, darlin', just be cool, he told her. There is an explanation for everthin'. Come with me—we have to talk, he said, as if he'd been waiting for her all along. Believe it or not, I am greatly relieved to see you, he said to her. He took no further notice of the kid in her arms, and as he picked up her bag and ushered her out the door he looked back at Jolene and told her out of the side of his mouth to hold tight, to hold tight, and outside he gallantly opened the car door for Marin Leger and sat her and their baby down and went off with them in the plum-color 1965 Caddy convertible he had once driven up every day to see Jolene wiggle her ass on skates.

Jolene, Jolene, of the Dairy Queen, she is so mean, she smashed the machinery. . . . She had never been so calm in her life as she quietly and methodically trashed Coco's Institute of Body Art, turning over the autoclave, pulling down the flash posters, banging the tattoo guns by their cables against the rear exposed-brick wall until they cracked, scattering the needle bars, pouring the inks on the floor, pulling the display case of 316L stainless-steel body jewelry off the wall, tearing the paperback tattoo books in the rotating stand. She smashed the director's chairs to pieces, and threw a metal footstool through the back-door window. She went upstairs, and, suddenly aware for the first time how their rooms smelled of his disgusting unwashed body, she busted up everything she could, tore up the bedding, swept everything out of the medicine cabinet, and pulled down the curtains she had chosen to make the place more homey. She took an armful of her clothes and stuffed them into two paper sacks, and when she found in a shoebox on their closet shelf a zip-lock plastic bag with another inside it packed with white stuff that felt under the thumb like baking powder she left it exactly where it was and, downstairs again, cleaned out the few dollars in the cash register, picked up the phone, left a precise message for the Phoenix P.D., and, putting up the Back in Five sign, she slammed the door behind her and was gone.

She was still dry-eyed when she went to the pawnshop two blocks away and got fifteen dollars for her wedding band. She waited at the storefront travel agency where the buses stopped, and didn't begin to cry till she wondered, for the first time in a long time, who her mom and dad might have been, and if they were still alive, as she thought they must be if they were too young to do anything but name her Jolene and leave her for the authorities to raise.

In Vegas, she waitressed at a coffee shop till she had enough money to have her hair straightened, which is what the impresario of the Starlet Topless told her she had to do if she wanted a job. So if she shook her head as she leaned back, holding onto the brass pole, her hair swished back and forth across her shoulders. Wearing a thong and high heels was not the most comfortable thing in the world, but she got the idea quickly enough and became popular as the most petite girl in the place. The other girls liked her, too—they called her Baby, and watched out for her. She rented a room in the apartment of a couple of them. Even the bouncer was solicitous after she lied to him that she was involved.

When she met Sal, a distinguished gray-haired man of some girth, it was at the request of the manager, who took her to a table in the back. That this man Sal chose not to sit at the bar and stare up her ass suggested to her he was not the usual bum who came into Starlets. He was a gentleman who, though not married, had several grandchildren. The first thing he did on their first date when she came up to his penthouse suite was show her their pictures. That's the kind of solid citizen Mr. Sal Fontaine was. She stood at the window looking out over all of Vegas. Quiet and soft-spoken, Sal was not only a dear man, as she came to know him, but one highly respected as the founder and owner of Sal's Line, with an office and banks of phones with operators taking calls from people all over the country wanting Sal's Line on everything from horses to who would be the next President. Without ceremony, which was his way, he put a diamond choker on her neck and asked her to move in with him. She couldn't believe her luck, living with a man highly regarded in the community in his penthouse suite of six rooms overlooking all of Vegas. It had maid service every morning. From the French restaurant downstairs you could order dinner on a rolling cart that turned into a table. Sal bought her clothes, she signed his name at the beauty parlor, and when they went out, though he was so busy it was not that often, she was treated with respect by the greeters, and by Sal's associates, mostly gentlemen of the same age range as his. She was totally overwhelmed. With all the leggy ass in Las Vegas, imagine, little Jolene, treated like a princess! And not only that but with time on her hands to develop a line of her own, of greeting cards she drew, psychedelic in style, sometimes inspired by her experience with tattoo designs but always with sentiments of loving family relationships that she dreamed up, as if she knew all about it.

She never thought she could be so happy. Sal liked her to climb all over him, he liked her to be on top, and they were very tender and caressing of one another, certainly on her part, because always in the back of her mind was the fear of his overexerting himself. And he talked so quietly and he believed or pretended to believe her life story, the parts that were made up as well as the parts that were true.

As she became used to the life, she reflected that Sal Fontaine did not give of himself easily. It wasn't a matter of his material generosity. He never confided in her. There was a distance in him, or maybe even a gloom, that for all his success he could not change in himself. If she had questions, if she was curious, she met a wall. He moved slowly, as if the air set up a resistance just to him. When he smiled, it was a sad smile, despite his capped teeth. And he had heavy jowls and hooded sad eyes made darker by the deep blue pouches under them. Maybe he could not forget what he had lost, his old country or his original family, who was she to say?

She would tell him she loved him, and at the moment she said it she did. The rest of the time she sort of shrugged to herself. The contractual nature of their relationship was all too clear to her, and she began to suspect that the regard Sal's friends held for her was not what they might have expressed among themselves. Her life, once the novelty wore off, was like eating cotton candy all day long. Her long straight red hair now shone with highlights. In the mornings, she would swim in the Olympic-size hotel pool with her hair in a single braid, trailing. She was this Jolene person who wore different Vegas-style outfits depending on the time of day or night. She saw herself in an I. Magnin fitting-room mirror one day and the word that came to her mind was "hard." When had it happened that she'd taken on that set of the mouth and stony gaze of the Las Vegas bimbo? Jesus.

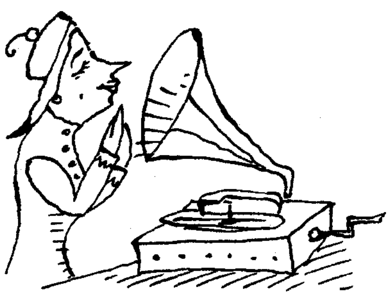
One evening, they were sitting watching television, and Sal said, out of the blue, that she didn't have to worry, she would be taken care of, he would settle something on her. Thank you, sweetheart, she said, not knowing exactly how or when he would do that but understanding the essential meaning: that she was in a situation designed not to last. The next morning, she took all her greeting-card designs to a print shop at the edge of town and spent two hours making decisions about the stock she wanted, the layouts, the typefaces, the amounts to print of each item, and so on. It was real business, and it made her feel good, even though she had no idea who would distribute her cards, let alone who would buy them. Step by step, she told herself in the cab back. Step by step.

A week later, the phone rang just when they were getting up, and Sal told her quickly to get dressed and go have breakfast in the coffee shop because some men were coming for a meeting. She said that was O.K., she would stay out of the way in the bedroom with a cup of coffee and the *Sun*. Don't argue, he shouted, and threw a dress at her face. She was speechless—he had never yelled at her before. She was waiting for the elevator when the doors opened and they came out, the men to meet with Sal. She saw them and they saw her, two of them looking, like so many of the men in Vegas, as if they had never felt the sun on their face.

But then in the coffee shop it dawned on her. She all at once turned cold and then sick to her stomach. She ran to the ladies' and sat there in a cold sweat. Such stories as you heard were never supposed to intrude into your own life.

How long did she sit there? When she found the courage to come out, and then out of the coffee shop into the lobby, she saw an ambulance at the front entrance. She stood in the crowd that gathered, and saw the elevator doors open and someone with an oxygen mask over his face and hooked up to an intravenous line being wheeled on a gurney through the lobby.

That it was Sal Fontaine was quickly agreed upon by everyone. Exactly what had happened to him was less clear. Finally, a police officer walking by said it was a heart attack. A heart attack.



She did not even have her purse, just the orange print mini she was wearing, and the sandals. She didn't even have any makeup—she had nothing. She saw the name of the hospital on the ambulance as it drove off and decided to go upstairs and put something on and take a cab there. But she couldn't move. She walked up the winding staircase to the mezzanine and sat in an armchair with her hands between her knees. Finally, she got up the courage to go back to the penthouse floor. If it was a heart attack, what were the police and TV cameras doing there? Everyone in the world was in the corridor, and the door to the apartment was sealed with yellow tape and under guard, and everything was out of her reach—Mr. Sal Fontaine and all her clothes and her diamond choker, and even the money he had given her over time, despite the fact that he never allowed her to pay for anything.

She had over a thousand dollars in the drawer on her side of the bed. She knew that eventually she could reclaim it if she wanted to be questioned by the police. But whatever was to happen to her now might not be as bad as what would happen if she risked it. Even if she told them nothing, what would Sal's Line be on her chances of living to her nineteenth birthday, which happened to be the next day? He was not around to tell her.

Which is how life changes, as lightning strikes, and in an instant what was is not what is, and you find yourself sitting on a rock at the edge of the desert, hoping some bus will come by and take pity on you before you're found lying dead there like any other piece of road kill.

Two years later, Jolene was living alone in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She had heard from a truck driver at a whistle stop in north Texas, where she was waiting tables, that Tulsa was a boomtown with not enough people for all the jobs. She'd taken a room at a women's residential hotel and first found work, part time, in the public library shelving books, and then full time as a receptionist at a firm that leased oil-drilling equipment. She had not been with anyone in a while, but it was kind of nice, actually. She was surprised at how pleasant life could be when you were on your own. She liked the way she felt walking in the street or sitting at a desk. Self-contained. Nothing begging inside her. I have come of age, she told herself. I have come of age.

To make some extra cash, she worked after hours on call for a caterer. She had to invest in the uniform—white blouse, black trousers, and black pumps—but each time she was called it meant sixty dollars for a minimum three hours. She wore her hair in the single braid down her back and she kept her eyes lowered, as instructed, but, even so, managed to see a good deal of the upper crust of Tulsa.

She was serving champagne on a tray at a private party one evening when this six-footer with blow-dried hair appeared before her. He was good-looking and he knew it. He grabbed a glass of champagne, drank it off, and took another and followed her into the kitchen. He didn't get anything out of her except her name, but he tracked her down through the caterer and sent her flowers with a note, signed Brad G. Benton, asking her out to dinner. Nobody in all her life had ever done that.

So she bought herself a dress and went out to dinner with Brad G. Benton at the country club, where the table linen was starched and there were crystal wineglasses and padded red leather chairs with brass studs. She wouldn't remember what she ate. She sat and listened with her hands in her lap. She didn't have to say much—he did all the talking. Brad G. Benton was not thirty-five and already a senior V.P. at this stock brokerage where they kept on giving him bonuses. He didn't want just to get her in bed. He said that since Jesus had come into his heart the only really good sex remaining to him was connubial sex. He said, Of course, you need someone precious and special enough for that, like you, Jolene, and looked deeply into her eyes.

At first, she couldn't believe he was serious. After a couple of more dates, she realized he was. She was thinking Brad G. Benton must be crazy. On the other hand, this was the Bible Belt, she had seen these super-sincere people at her receptionist's job. They might be rich and do sophisticated business around the world, but they were true believers in God's written word with no ifs, ands, or buts. From the looks of things it was a knockout combination, though a little weird, like they had one foot in the boardroom and one in Heaven.

You don't know anything about me, Jolene told him, in an effort to satisfy herself of her integrity. I expect soon to know everything, he said, flashing a big handsome smile that could have been a leer.

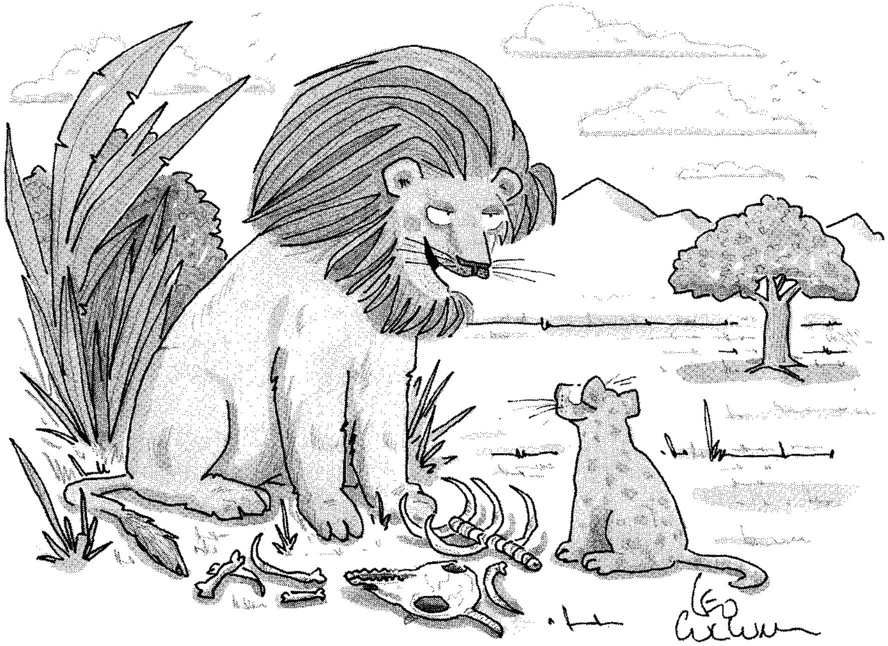
He was so damn cocky. She almost resented that there was never any doubt in his mind as to what she would say. He insisted she quit her job and move to a hotel at his expense until the wedding day. Oh, what day is that? she said, teasing, but he was a wild man: The engagement will necessarily be short, he said, slipping a diamond ring on her finger.

A week later, they were married in the chapel of the First Methodist Church there in Tulsa that looked like Winchester Cathedral. Brad G. Benton brought her to live in his apartment in a new building that had a swimming pool in the basement and a gym on the roof. They were high enough to see out over the whole city, though there wasn't that much to see in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

So once more her fortunes had changed and little Jolene was a young matron of the upper class. She wanted to write to someone about this incredible turn in her life, but who could she write to? Who? There was no one. In that sense, nothing had changed, because she was as alone as she had always been, a stranger in a strange land.

Things in the marriage were O.K. at first, though some of Brad G. Benton's ideas were not to her taste. He was very athletic, and no sooner satisfied in one orifice than she was turned over for the other. Also, he seemed not to notice her artwork. She had bought an easel and set up a little studio in what was designed to be the maid's room, because the Indian woman who cooked and cleaned had her own home to go to each evening. Jolene painted there and stretched her canvases, and she took a figure-painting class once a week where there were live models. She did well, her teacher was very encouraging, but Brad took none of this in, he just didn't notice—he was too busy with his work and his workouts and his nights out and his nights in her.

It turned out Brad G. Benton's family was prominent in Tulsa. Not one of them had come to the wedding, their purpose being to define to her what white trash meant. At first she didn't care that much. But she'd see their pictures in the newspapers being honored at charity events. They had wings of buildings named after them. One day, coming from shopping, she looked out the cab window as it passed a glass office tower that said Benton International on a giant brass cube balanced



"Fortunately, the law of the jungle doesn't require lawyers of the jungle."

on one of its corners in the plaza out front.

She said to Brad, I would think they had more respect for you, if not for me. But he only laughed. It was not so much that he was a democrat in his ideals, as she was to realize; it was part of his life's work to do outrageous things and raise hell. It was how he kept everyone's attention. He loved to twist noses out of joint. He was contrary. He hadn't joined the Benton family enterprise, as he was supposed to—it was a holding company with many different kinds of businesses in their hands—but had gone off on his own to show what he was made of.

Jolene knew that if she wanted to prove anything to this family, if she wanted any kind of social acceptance in Tulsa, Oklahoma, she would have to work for it. She would have to start reading books and take a course or two in something intellectual and embrace the style of life, the manners, the ways of doing and talking by being patient and keeping her eyes and ears open. She would attend their church, too. As wild as he was, Brad was like his father, what he called a strong Christian. That was the one place they *would* have to meet and, she was willing to bet, speak to one another. And how then could the family not speak to her?

Oddly enough, she was looking as good as she ever had, and Brad took her once a week to dinner at the country club to show her off. By then, everyone in town knew this so-called Cinderella story. Grist for the mill. He was heedless, he just didn't worry about it, whereas she could hardly raise her head. One evening, his father and mother were sitting at a far table with their guests, who looked as if they were there to serve them as much as the waiters. Brad waved—it was more like a salute—and the father nodded and resumed his conversation.

Through no fault of her own, Jolene had stepped into a situation that was making her life miserable. Whatever was going on with these people, what did *it* have to do with her? Nothing. She was as nothing.

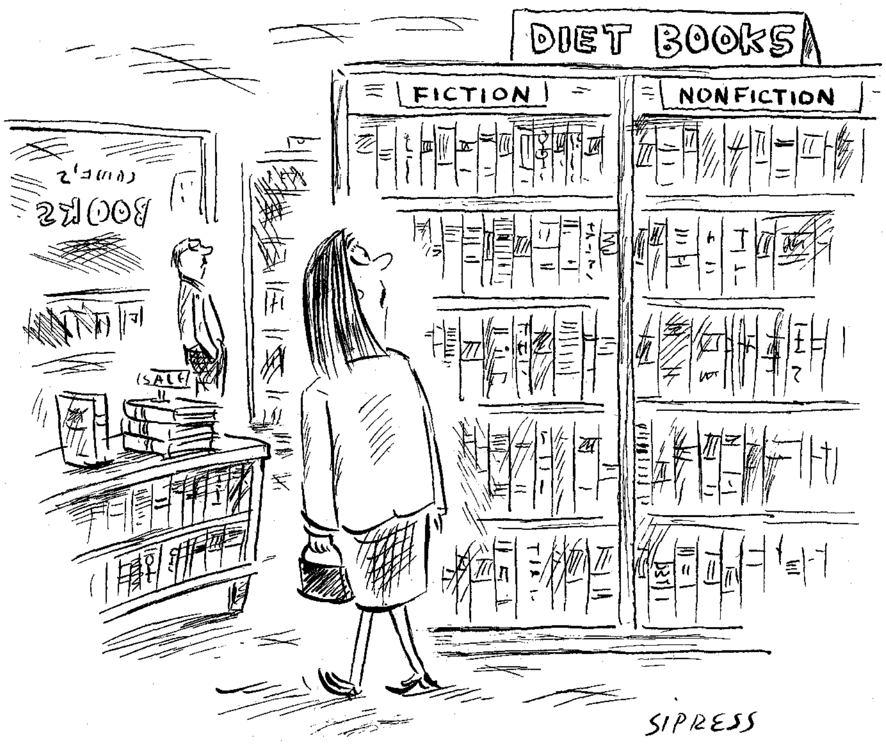
To tell the truth, she had made Brad for a creep that first time he came on to her at that cocktail party. He'd padded into the kitchen, stalking her like some animal, taken the empty champagne tray out of her hands, and told her redheads smelled different. And he stood there sniffing her and going, Hmm, yes, like warm milk.

After her baby was born, when Brad G. Benton started to bat her around, Jolene could not help but remember that first impression.

Every little thing drove him crazy. It got so she couldn't do anything, say anything, without he would go off half-cocked. He took to hitting her, slapping her face, punching her. What are you doing, she screamed. Stop it, stop it! It was his new way of getting off. He would say, You like this? You like it? He'd knock her around, then push her down on the bed. She grew accustomed to living in fear of getting beaten up and forced against her will. She was still to learn what they would teach at the shelter—it happens once, that's it, you leave. But now she just tried to see it through. Brad G. Benton had been to college, he came of money, and he wore good clothes, and she was flattered that he would fall for her when she didn't even have a high-school diploma. And then, of course, there were the apologies and the beggings for forgiveness and the praying in church together, and by such means she slowly became a routinely abused wife.

Only when it was all over would she realize it wasn't just having the baby; it was their plans for him, the Bentons' plans for her Mr. Nipplebee. He was an heir, after all. The minute they'd found out she was pregnant, they went to work. And after he was born they slowly gave it to Brad in bits and pieces, what their investigators had learned about her life before. Never mind that she had tried to tell Brad about her marriages, her life on the road; he never wanted to hear it, he had no curiosity about her, none. He had blessed her with his insanity. She had appeared in Tulsa as a vision, God's chosen sex partner for him, a fresh and wet and shining virgin with red hair. All those beatings were what he was told, and all those apologies were the way his love for her was hanging on. She would feel sorry for him if she could, because he was so wired, such a maniac—it was as if his wildness, his independent choice of life was being driven from him, as if it was the Devil. It was those parents slowly absorbing him back into their righteousness.

One day, Brad G. Benton appeared at the door to her little studio room when he would ordinarily be at work. She was ruling off a grid on one of her canvases, as she had been taught. Brad! she said, smiling. But there was no recognition in his eyes. He kicked the stool out from under her. He broke the easel over his knee, he bashed her canvases against the wall, tore down the drawings she had pinned up there, and then he squeezed tubes of paint into her face as he held her down on the floor. And he began hitting her as she lay there, he punched her face, he punched her in the throat. When he got off her, she could hear his breathing—it was like crying. He



stood over her, kicked her in the side, and as suddenly as he had come he was gone.

She lay there moaning in pain, too frightened and shocked even to get up, until she thought of the baby. She dragged herself to the nursery. The Cherokee woman, who had heard everything, sat beside the crib with her hand over her eyes. But the baby was sleeping peacefully. Jolene washed her face, and, wrapping up her Mr. Nipplebee, she took him with her as she dragged herself to a doctor. She was told that she had had her cheekbone fractured, two broken ribs, contusions of the throat, and a bruised kidney. How did this happen? the doctor asked her. She was afraid to tell him and, besides, it hurt too much to talk. But the nurse in the office didn't have to be told. She wrote out the name and address of a women's shelter and said, Go there right now. I'll order you a cab. And in that way, with her precious in her arms and only what she was wearing, Jolene left her marriage.

She could hardly bear staying at the shelter, where there were these wimpy women looking for her friendship, her companionship. Jolene wouldn't even go to the group sessions. She stayed by herself and nursed Mr. Nipplebee.

The shelter gave her the name of a woman lawyer, and she put down a retainer. Get me a divorce as fast as you can, she told the lawyer. The money, I don't care. I'll take anything they give. I just want out of here and out of Tulsa, Oklahoma. And then she waited, and waited, and nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. This went on for some time. And the next thing Jolene knew, when she was about stripped of her savings, the lawyer quit on her. She was an older woman, who wore pin-striped suits and big loopy bronze earrings. I may be broke, Jolene said to her, but Brad G. Benton has money to burn, and I can pay you afterward out of the alimony or child care.

You didn't tell me you had a past including a stretch in juvenile detention, the lawyer said. To say nothing of a previous, as yet un-annulled marriage to a convicted drug dealer.

Jolene was so stunned she didn't think to ask how the lawyer knew that if she hadn't told her.

She was up against a scumbag husband on his own turf, so what could she expect but that there was worse to come, as there was, if he knew all along where she was hiding, and if he knew by first name everyone in town, as he probably did the very police officers who came one morning to arrest her for unlawful kidnapping of her own child, who they took from her arms, driving him off in one squad car and Jolene in another as she looked back screaming.

I don't want to hear about what is the law in this country and what is not, Jolene told the legal-aid person who was assigned to her. Do you know what it means to have your child torn from you? Do you have to have that happen to you to know it is worse than death? You want to kill yourself but you can't for thinking of the child's welfare in the hands of a sick father who never smiled at him and was jealous of him from the day he was born.

My baby, she said aloud when she was alone. My baby.

He had her coloring and button nose and carrot-red fuzz for hair. He drank from her with a born knowledge of what was expected of him. He was a whole new life in her arms, and for the very first time she could remember she had had something she wanted. She was Jolene, his mother, and could believe in God, who had never before seemed to her to be much of a fact of life.

And so now there was a hearing for the divorce Brad had filed for. And his whole miserable family was there, they loved him after all, now that he was getting rid of her and her past was thrown in her face. They had it all down, including the medical records of her S.T.D. from Coco, her living in sin, and even her suspension one term at Jeff Davis High for smoking pot. It was a no-brainer. Her legal-aid kid was out of his league, and without giving it much thought the judge ruled she was an unfit mother and granted Brad G. Benton sole custody of her Mr. Nipplebee.

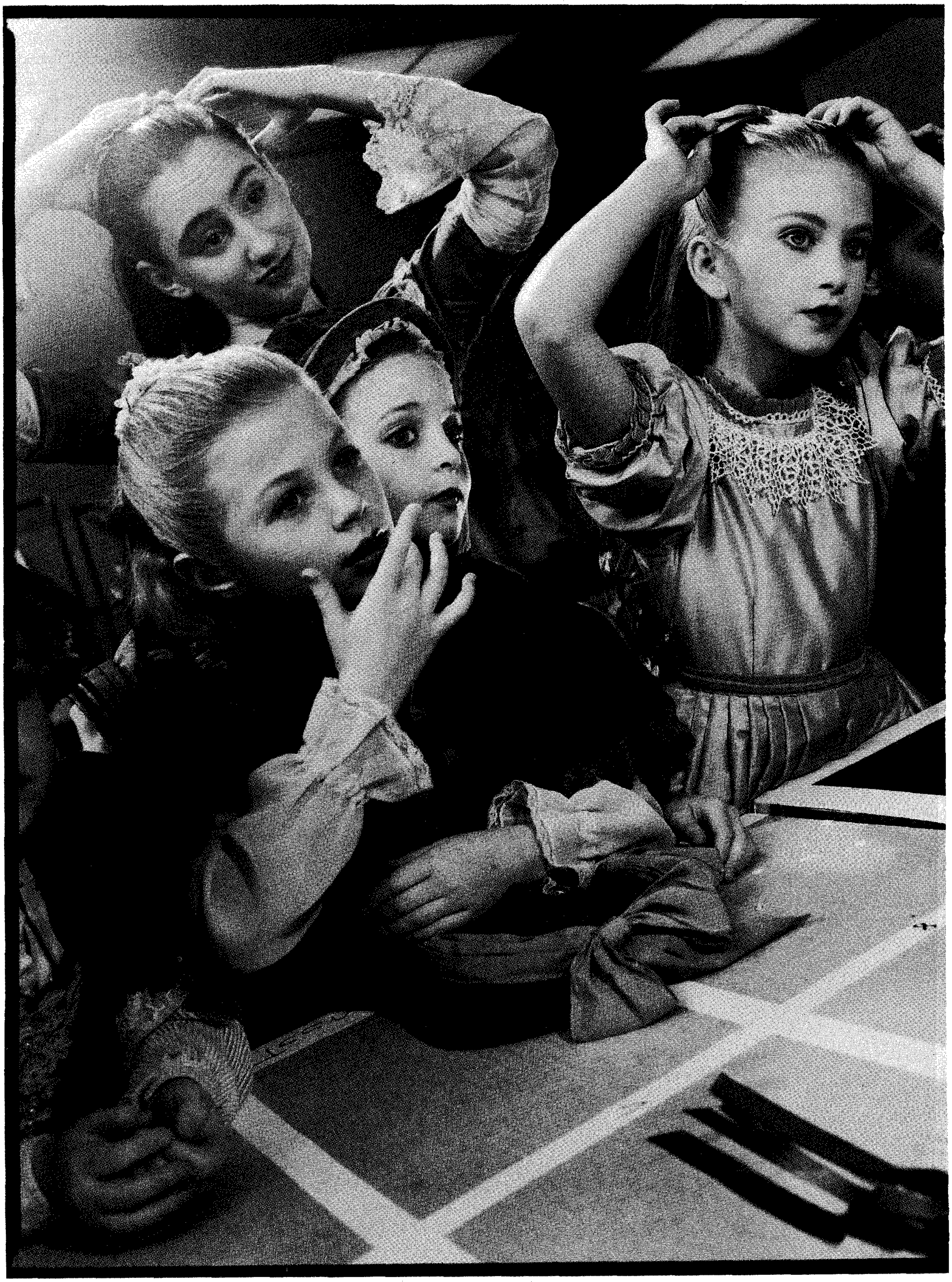
On top of everything, in the fullness of her milk that she had to pump out, she must have done something wrong, because she ended up in the hospital with a staph infection that had to be drained—like the milk had gone bad and turned green. But she had a chance to think. She thought of her choices. She could kill Brad G. Benton—it'd be simple enough to buy some kind of gun and wait on him—but then the baby would be raised by the Benton family. So what was the point? She could find a job and see the baby every second Sunday for one hour, as allowed by the judge, and rely on the passing of time for the moment when nobody was looking and she could steal him back and run for it. But then on her first visitation what happened was that Brad was up in the gym and a new large Indian woman was with Mr. Nipplebee, and Brad's crone of a mother stood with her back to the door and they wouldn't let Jolene hold him but just sit by the crib and watch him sleep. And she thought, If I stay on in Tulsa for my visitations, he will grow up learning to think of me as an embarrassment, a poor relative, and I can't have that.

These days, Jolene has a job in West Hollywood inking for a small comic-book company, except they don't call them comic books—they call them graphic novels. Because most of them aren't funny at all. They are very serious. She likes the people at work—they are all good pals and go out for pizza together. But where she lives is down near the farmers' market in a studio apartment that is sacred to her. Nobody can come in, no matter how good a friend. She has a little stereo for her Keith Jarrett CDs and she lights a candle and drinks a little wine and dreams of plans for herself. She thinks someday, when she has more experience, of writing a graphic novel of her own, "The Life of Jolene."

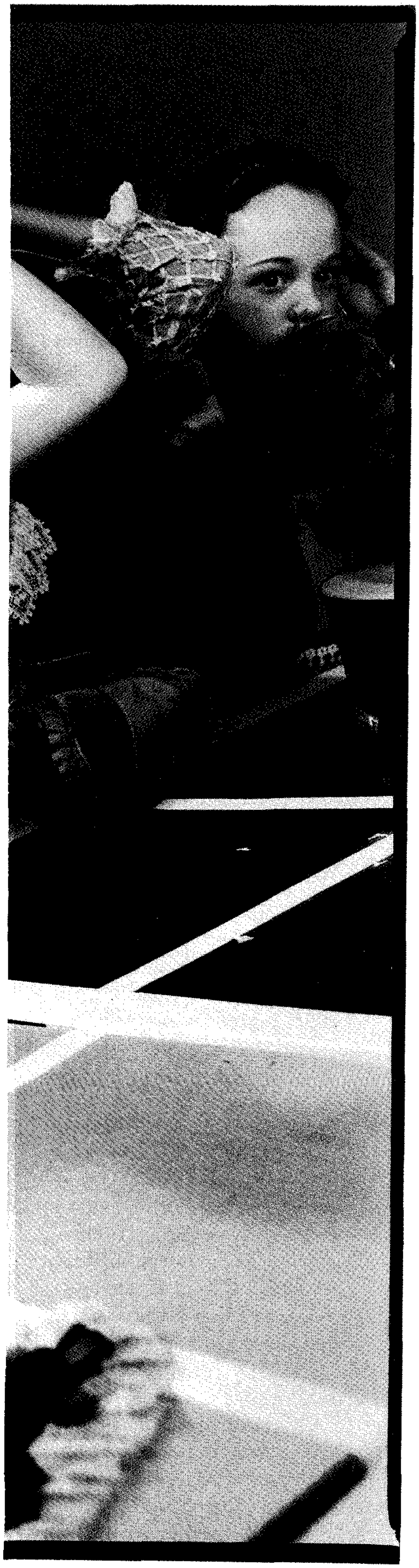
She has a pastel sketch she once did of her precious baby. It is so sweet! It's the only likeness she has. Sometimes she looks at this sketch and then at her own face in the mirror, and because he takes after her in his coloring and features, she tries to draw what he might look like at his present age, which is four and a half.

Friends tell Jolene she could act in movies, because she may be twenty-five but she looks a lot younger. And they like her voice, which, courtesy of her ex-husband, cracks like Janice Joplin's. And her crooked smile, which she doesn't tell them is the result of a busted cheekbone. So she's had some photos taken and is sending them out to professional agents.

I mean, why not? Jolene says to herself. She has this daydream. Her son sees her up on the screen one day. And when she takes herself back to Tulsa in her Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud he answers the door and rushes into the arms of his movie-star mother. ♦



The guests for the Christmas party (above) and the tin soldiers, with their sentry, a bunny (right), prepare to go onstage in Balanchine



utcracker.”

MARY ELLEN MARK BEHIND THE SCENES

WISE CHILD

Certain productions of "The Nutcracker" don't use child dancers—adults play the children—but in George Balanchine's version for New York City Ballet, created in 1954, there is a battalion of fifty-four youngsters, all from the School of American Ballet. In using them, Balanchine was being true to the "Nutcracker" of his schooldays—the original, 1892 St. Petersburg production—in which he himself was a child dancer. He played the lead Candy Cane and also the Prince. That's why the Candy Cane's dance and the Prince's beautiful mime solo are the only parts of his "Nutcracker" that reproduce Lev Ivanov's original choreography; because Balanchine danced those roles, he remembered the steps.

But the children's presence is more than an act of fidelity. Some people believe that "The Nutcracker" is a tale about growing up, and a celebration of that process. By dreaming of the Sugar Plum Fairy and her cavalier, Clara learns about adult love, and begins to feel it. But in Balanchine's Wordsworthian view Clara would have been lucky to stay the way she was—imagining, not becoming. (After all, she will not grow up to be the Sugar Plum Fairy. She's going to be like her mother.) Children, he felt, knew better than adults; they lived the true life, the life of the mind. "Nonreality is the real thing," he said. And so there had to be children in his ballet. They were the source of its wisdom.

—*Joan Acocella*

FICTION

THE TRIALS OF FINCH

BY ZADIE SMITH

SAY HELLO TO FINCH

FiNch
BABY KILLER!
THE
EXPRESS
Laurie Rosenwald

Finch had three friends: Claire, Karen, and Jemima. These were tall, lucky, professional Englishwomen in their early forties who had been ever so kind to Finch, and who felt, with some reason, that they had saved her. Ten years ago, when Finch first entered their circle, these three women were married, they had families and intricate lives, and Finch had no one and nothing. It was a friendship so unlikely it had the color of charity. By befriending her, they plucked poor Finch from the very edge of something. Stopped her from slipping down a notch to join the lonely mad, who were visible everywhere in Hampstead, with their sticks and props and wigs, spitting, effortful, bent. Because of her friends, Finch was not one of these people. She had a job and did not fear the London Underground or any of its African employees with their blue caps and bloodshot eyes. She had been persuaded (after a battle!) to give up long, bright socks and men's suspenders. She no longer kept food loose in her pockets. It turned out that Finch wasn't mad at all—she was only an eccentric.

And this, exactly this, is what Claire had sensed about Finch the day they met on Hampstead Heath, as Claire walked her Labrador, Charlie, up a hill: this woman needs only a little tolerance, kindness. Claire was a school administrator, and used to people with difficulties. She had waited a patient minute for Finch to release the catch of her stutter and ask if she might touch the beautiful dog. Claire was struck by the guileless, awkward, yet overflowing way Finch expressed herself; the apologetic, sloping walk. Three times they bumped into each other before Finch found herself invited to tea. Through Claire, Finch was (pointedly) introduced to Karen, who was a speech therapist, and through Karen came Jemima, an immigration lawyer. Soon the women, who had not been especially close before the arrival of Finch, found a certain camaraderie in the fact they all knew this odd woman and cared for her. Finch needs a Christmas dress! Finch is menopausal! In return, Finch became the *ideal* friend, remembering all significant details (husbands' jobs, children's names, birthdays, injustices of hated colleagues), and thus by the quality of her attention lending a distinction to three rather plain, contented lives. Finch rented their world and lived there happily. She loved walking into her friends' houses, to be suddenly immersed in the great, laughing, compressed engine of their families (so mysterious to Finch!); the tinny, circular piano minuets being practiced in the lounge, the fat cat at her feet, the ricochet of a tennis ball through a hallway.

Finch herself was fifty-two, stout, orange-haired, and stacked front and back like the Hottentot Venus; she wore a big red face that looked always as if she'd been fishing in a storm. She was the (very occasional) substitute maths teacher at a small, cozy private girls' school (Claire and Jemima, both parent governors, wangled it), and although there was nothing wrong with Finch's maths, the girls were warned beforehand about her accelerated and repetitive speech pattern (not a stutter—she'd overcome the stutter, with Karen's help) and Finch's eyes and the way they rolled. They called her Chaffinch, Finchy, the Finchster—she didn't mind. The important thing was to be familiar enough not to frighten, and

LAURIE ROSENWALD

if the girls thought her curious, they were instructed by their mothers never to show it.

Recently things had grown hard for the women in Finch's life. Their houses turned complex. Their marriages had reached private boiling points and now the husbands began to evaporate. Naturally, Finch wanted to be able to help her friends as she had been helped. Only, she had no experience in this area. She'd never been married and knew no more about what goes on inside a marriage than inside the reactor of a nuclear plant. She had simply assumed that her friends were happy, and that they would stay that way. Continuity was a religious thing for Finch. And so these latest messages on the answer machine ("Finch, bloody bad news I'm afraid . . . ," "Oh, Finch, it's all gone tits up . . . ") made her frantic. Men who had been considered kind were now revealed as unkind; love was not love but some lethal quality that came first with flowers and then tried to leave with the furniture. One marriage after another! They seemed related somehow in their failure, like fallen trees. But any deeper than this Finch could not penetrate, not being the sort of person love (or the failure of love) touched, just as she was not the sort of person who would ever go to China or dance a Latin dance with a Latin man.

Finch felt she was no longer welcome. She pitched across Hampstead Heath each morning, massive and nervous, her head tucked toward the strap of her teacher's satchel, her furled umbrella held high and horizontal, fretfully pressed against her chest like the safety bar on a roller coaster. Two silent months flipped by. She didn't phone, they didn't phone. Was it a standoff? No one, including Finch, could see how she fit into this new, frozen, furious order of things. What could one tell *Finch* about a *divorce*? How could the whole long, sordid story be explained?

Then, on a November Tuesday, Claire came around unexpectedly. Although she never quite came in. Simply stood on the doorstep, vibrating with anger, elaborately bedraggled, holding a big white box. Claire was an ash blonde with brown eyes, a thin woman grown wide at the hips, but no thicker anywhere else, like a viola. Her husband was already on conditional reprieve from a previous sexual misdemeanor. This had relegated him to a spare room with no television, called to dinner by a polite knock on his door from the children. Now Claire had intercepted a fox-fur hat her husband intended for a younger lady. It was all over. As she told Finch this, Claire's face began to fracture and Finch couldn't understand, for a moment, what was about to happen. The skin on Claire's neck and jaw grew so tight that in her anguish she looked twenty again. And now Finch could see that Claire was crying.

"I can't *bear* to wear it, and she *certainly* isn't going to get to wear it," said Claire, and thrust the box at Finch's bosom. "You have it, Finch—you bloody wear it all the time, just you stomp around in it for me, all right? Pretend you're in Doctor bloody Zhivago."

Finch was stupefied and began rubbing the hubs of her palms together, a nervous habit. Seeing her difficulty, Claire apologized, and handed Finch two pieces of post she had picked up from the hallway, placing them on top of the box like stones for a grave.

"Oh, Finch! Of course you don't need to hear this stuff. It's just all been such a mess. Such a bloody mess. And I realize that I have to find something to make it all *doable* again. Just to make the day-by-day bearable. It's very hard, that's all."

Then she left. Finch shut the door slowly with her big Reuben toe. She put the post in her pocket, went to sit down on the sofa. After a while, she opened the box. The hat was very glamorous and didn't quite fit, but with liberal tugging Finch quickly discovered it could be forced. She heaved herself up onto an armchair and stood perilously on its arms, like a water-skier, to look in the mirror above the fireplace. She rubbed her fingers in the pelt. It was not in Finch to suspect how thoroughly she was being employed in discreet revenge against the husband, Geoff (who had liked Vermeer and disliked chilblains; Finch had compulsively bought him pairs of insulated socks), but vaguely she sensed the dark joke in giving this long-haired hat with its sexual static to dumpy, orange Finch. Love must recede so far, she thought anxiously, that in the end it wants to take the meaning out of everything, even the clothes. She climbed down and went to sit in the kitchen on her stool. She unscrewed a waiting jar of olives. The hat sat on an adjacent stool like a pet, twitching in the draft. Finch opened a drawer and removed a wooden chopstick she had sharpened to a point with an automatic pencil sharpener from the staff room. She took a fat novel from a small tower of same that stood where the kitchen bar met the wall, and opened it where she had left off.

And then Finch's mother phoned. Finch's mother never phoned for conversation, only monologue. Today's concerned her mother's partner, a Mr. Eric Frost, whom Finch had never met, because Finch had no physical contact with her family. But Finch knew all about Mr. Frost—his story was given to her in biweekly installments. Holding the phone with one hand, Finch kept the olive jar steady with her elbows. She was ready to turn the next page with the chopstick if she had to.

"Am I too harsh?" asked Finch's mother, and did not wait for an answer. "Should I have given him more time? But in the end it was like having a second *child*, that's the only way I can describe it. He became a *responsibility*."

"Hmm," said Finch, who was now separating the quicksilver anchovies from the olives they came in. She gagged on fish—something to do with the idea of scales—and yet always bought the olives with the anchovies in them.

"What was I meant to do—look *after* him? I've already done that with you and with your father, and I'm too *old*, Finch, for that sort of compromise."

"No," said Finch cautiously, and began opening her post with a butter knife. It upset her because it wasn't just love that was being deleted in her mother's monologues, it was the man himself. Though it was true that Mr. Frost was a bore, was a bully, Finch believed in the sovereignty of other people.

"And so here we are," sniffed Finch's mother, while Finch lay down the phone bill and opened the second, rougher brown envelope. "Oh, darling, you can't understand a word of this, can you? But you're the only one I can talk to. At least you *listen*. . . . We've not had much luck, have we? The women of this family—we have this awful, evil luck. Hello?"

So surprised was Finch by her second letter, she dropped the phone.

"Hello? *Hello*?"

"I have jury service," said Finch, picking up the receiver, speaking in only a whisper. "Jury service! I've just received a letter. I've just opened it, opened it just now, opened it. I'm getting oil all over—"

"It's so *different* for men," continued Finch's mother passionately, as Finch placed the phone down upon its side and wiped her oily hands on her thighs. "Time doesn't work in the same way for men. It's not hunting them *down*."

Finch was not eligible for jury duty. Not eligible. Not at all! This fact sat with the few things Finch knew for certain about herself: that she must not drink coffee or alcohol or go near the sea or drive a car. Finch could not work out whether her mother was ignoring her or didn't believe her or both; but she had no doubt about the miraculous letter. Though it turned see-through from the oil, the letter was real. Finch held it up to her face. The Heath pressed close against Finch's house, and at the window was a tree whose leaves had turned so exactly gold they seemed to Finch as collectible as a horse chestnut's silken conker—as noble, as elevated in their relation to bark, or mud. As her mother's fricatives fizzed through the receiver, a slice of the sun filtered through these leaves and found Finch out, rereading once more, astonished.

FINCH THE PROSPECTIVE JUROR

Claire had brought about the détente: lunch followed. Finch wore a very unfortunate red jumper paired with a yet more unfortunate pair of orange dungarees, which made her friends wonder if they would ever be successful with Finch. And, more aggravating, she seemed to them all to be inexplicably jolly today, smiling, eagerly tucking into her food, humming. What made Finch so bloody cheery? Outside, the rain fell at a vicious angle, the Government was not what anyone had hoped, and the liquid infidelities of husbands were hardening into relationships, taking shape. Why, then, this humming? Her friends could not know that Finch was going to be a juror! Finch herself considered it such a piece of good fortune she did not know how to offer it into the present conversation, here where each woman's miseries were being laid out across the table like delicacies, to be sampled.

"I feel," Karen was saying, reaching over Finch to stab a sausage, "like my life is imploding. Never in my life have I been a violent person—I wouldn't even recognize that impulse in myself—but now, when I get these lawyers' letters, I just feel extraordinarily ill-used, and there's a real degree of hatred that becomes toxic inside you."

"Hmm," Jemima was saying. "Well, that's right. That's absolutely . . ."

The waiter was hovering. "Shall I take?"

Claire had a competing claim: "Now, I don't see that at all. I'm actually filled with pity for him, because *he's* the one who's missing the support network."

And Finch was stroking her hat, about to explode with her untold news.

"But, Claire, you don't really think he ever had *any* intention *at all* of," began Karen, and then noticed the unusual Finchian silence and made a motion to Claire to try and include her.

"Wait—Finch—" said Claire. "Finch, put on the hat for a second, just to show. You haven't worn it out yet."

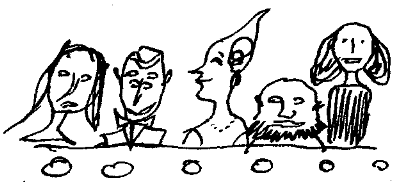
"*The* hat? Oh, Finch, put it on now, go *on*," said Jemima, turning to her. "That hat was *made* for you. Go *on*, Finch."

"I prefer to carry it than wear it, wearing it," said Finch, smiling warily, but she liked to be cajoled. She forced the thing downward, and just as it settled over her ears her jolliness bubbled over, and she made a most unusual face, a lopsided pout. For a moment, Finch had seen herself other than she was, but here came the corrective: a great, clanging laughter burst from her friends.

"I wish I had a camera," said Claire, thumping the tablecloth. "I'd send a photo of you to Geoff. I bloody would. I'd give him the photo as settlement. I'd say, 'I'll keep the house, you have the Finch photo.'"

Finch remembered Geoff. He once called Finch aside in the kitchen and showed her how to put a skewer in a chicken and watch for the running, pink juice.

"I have to go soon," said Finch. "I really have to go. I've got jury service tomorrow, jury service!" Tomorrow Finch was going to be a juror!



The women groaned and sympathized and Karen told her that her rule of thumb in court was not to trust anyone with his eyes too close together. The topic passed lightly on, puddings were ordered. Suddenly Finch rose.

"Must get going, now really, now, just to be safe, really. Jury service tomorrow. Thank you for the hat, very warm, very, very warm, really."

"Finch, where are you going? It's pitch black outside. Let's call you a cab or something, or one of us'll walk—"

"Oh, Finch, wait. Finch, don't be ridiculous—"

"It's *pissing* it down—"

But Finch wanted to establish the most convenient walking route from her home to the court, in the city. She left the restaurant and chose a route through West Heath, off the main lamplit paths. There had been a storm the night before and it depressed Finch to see the trees shrink back from her, exhausted. One beech had cracked and lay inconsolable on the ground. Finch tearfully approached it, stepping through the slutch, and walked the trunk, elevated slightly above the ground. The fissure came halfway along, and, bending to inspect it, Finch felt happier seeing the rot and ringworm inside, knowing it had been rotten already. She continued over the ragged hill and down its pruned east side until she hit pavement again, where she caught a bus to the court. Here she stood humbly before its archway and thought hard about the law. Finch's brain at once opened out onto a palatial Victorian house made of white marble where, for Finch, Truth lived. Here, in the house of Truth, everything could be seen! Finch bit into her lip and hugged herself and set off the security light by stepping through a laser.

She caught the bus back. She sat on the back seats of the top deck feeling completely mad, in a kind of anticipatory fit. She caught herself rubbing her left shoe compulsively against the skin of her right ankle, something her friends had advised her not to do in public, and she barely noticed the young black man who had lost something, who was stalking the empty upper deck in a temper. He held a slender flashlight connected to a key ring, and thrice he got down on his knees to inspect the floor beneath her seat with this tiny light and each time he seemed more exasperated by the monolith of Finch, her hat in her lap, implacably turned to the back window, squinting at a set of vanishing gold scales. Tomorrow Finch would attend somebody else's trial. Whose? What had they done? Why?

"I've enjoyed about as much of this as I can stand."

• •

AND NOTHING BUT THE

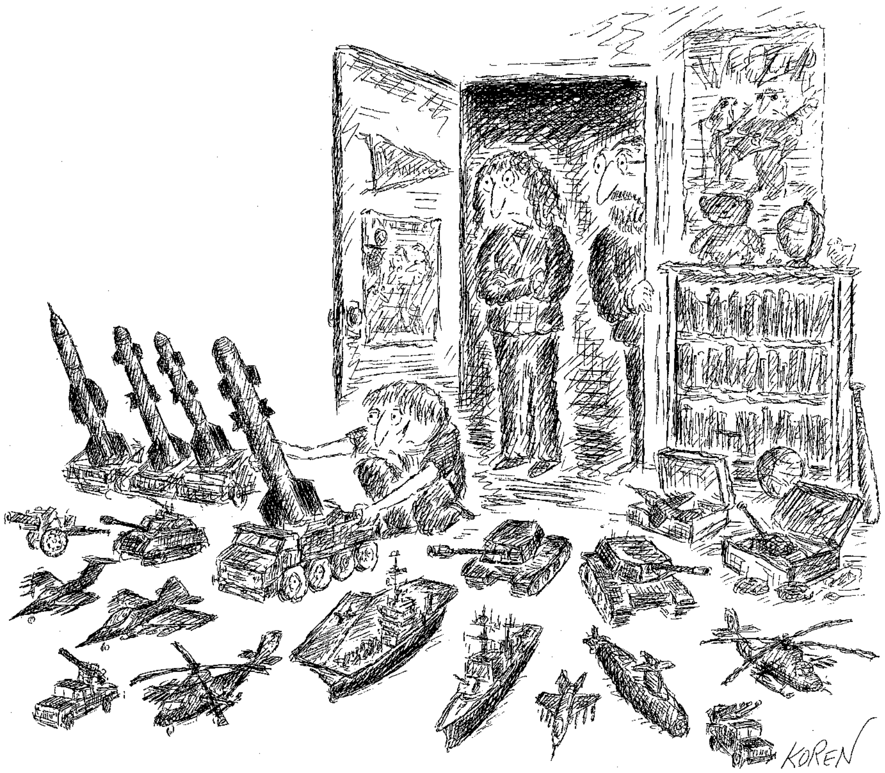
Of course, at a certain point in her life, Finch had lived through a bad day. One might guess that much, simply by meeting her. But would it be clear *how* bad? Finch was eleven at the time. She was wearing green pantaloons with a fleur-de-lis pattern, a white shirt with puffy shoulders, red leather sandals, and pink socks with feminine frills at the ankle. She carried a small clasp purse made of milky, iridescent beads, a few of which were found later, sitting guilty in the sand. Her hair was shoulder length and drawn into a French plait; a bobble held the flyaway ends. She was four feet nine (only seven inches smaller than her adult height) and of average weight. Her name, her real name, was Rosalind Jane Gordon. She was on holiday, staying with her parents in a bed-and-breakfast in Padstow, Cornwall, and, as the air turned salt and people hunted the wet beach below, Finch began to understand the enormity of the thing she had done, and hid in the shed.

The children were called Beth and Andrew Cotton, eight years old and six. Finch met them that same afternoon; they had wandered down to where she was rock-pooling and watched as she dug at whelks with a penknife, cut them from their shells, and handed them on to her fishing father, who pierced them with a hook. The boy stood behind his sister as Finch fearlessly picked up a crab and let it scuttle around in the basin of her cupped hands. Finch showed them the circular coils that worms leave in the sand as they work their way down, and how to stand with just your feet in the water while the surf and the beach seem to draw thunderously away from you. But then the children had grown bored. Finch felt an odd, adult pressure to entertain them. On a sudden inspiration, she took Beth and Andrew for a walk over the dunes, up mighty Trevose Head, scrambling and laughing. When Andrew felt a stinging cut between his toes, Finch stopped and picked the sand out and wiped it clean with a leaf. But she was bossy, the eleven-year-old Finch, as well as maternal; when she was finished, she made him walk on though he complained and asked to stop. They went high up onto the very tip of the crag. There the three of them sat while Finch prepared a fictional picnic amid the long, itchy grass. Imaginary plates, imaginary knives and forks, dishes her mother cooked, cakes she'd made.

Finch had known the children now for an hour and a half. Beth was pretty in the ideal, English, gold-and-rose way (much was made of this later), and Andrew was paler, white blond, no eyebrows. Very bright, very popular, both of them—but Finch could not know this. How did they upset Finch, these two? What was the offense? Refusing to acknowledge that it was an invisible loaf sitting in the empty hands she held out, maybe—that was as close as Finch ever came to remembering why she had turned her little hands, and pushed. Later, it became important to say it very clearly, without poetry and in the first person: With my hands I pushed them off the edge, I killed them. And this, in other, therapeutic, adult hands, became: *The two younger children refused to collude with the imaginary creation of the elder child and so she, already pathologically dissociated from the idea of the sovereignty of other people (due to sustained violence at the hands of the father), unleashed her ability to make the imaginary happen.* No matter how the story was told, it remained a remarkable, singularly awful thing to have happened. There is a kindness that says it could have happened to anyone. Then there is the one-way, merciless velocity that actions have in the world, which means that it happened only to Finch. She did the pushing. And over the children went.

Hello, Finch, and goodbye. Finch's biographer has to begin here, in this pale place, where Finch's life, her independent existence, seemed to finish. A low-security children's-care facility called Farrington, in Southampton, on the coast. She spent ten years there. Because her photograph had been widely published, and the story a sensation, Finch was treated brutally by people who made it their sport to try to destroy her. She was raped by a junior care worker and said nothing about it, her right arm was broken twice in six years—in short, everything unfolded in the institutional style of the time, including the therapy. Finch was made to enlarge and solidify that day in Padstow until it was a monumental disk that blacked out the sun. She developed a stutter that left her mouth open so long that sometimes people thought she was choking. Hello, poor Finch, and goodbye.

Finch did her best to complete her



"O.K., Saddam, we want a full and accurate accounting of what you've got—or else!"

education in piecemeal fashion. She discovered the nimble shape of her maths brain. She read the way people read who have no liberty—without humor or delicacy—and tolerated nothing but novels. She marked little crosses in the margins of her books at what seemed, to the therapists, random points. In fact, each cross marked a step on the path to the resolution (although these steps were very particular to Finch's view of the world: in a simple action like closing a door, she saw ethical change—condemning Gregor Samsa for making his mother spill the coffee, dismissing Jane Eyre for cowering in a nook behind a curtain). And as her adolescence finished its work her body met her mind; she grew ever more heavyset and charmless, arms spattered with orange moles, an unfinished face, boneless and round, dominated by hulking spectacles. She was waiting for something to happen. Nothing happened. There was never any trial for Finch, and no prison, and the curiosity of her case, from the therapeutic point of view, was how much her late teens came to be filled with a longing for a jury and for punishment. She fell in love with the idea of a judge the way other girls envision their princes. Finch wanted to *feel* the law. So when her own resolution came she rejected it. Finch turned twenty-one and was free to go. The popular dream of a new name and life was put at her disposal in the tidy form of paperwork. Instead, she voluntarily readmitted herself into an adult-care facility, Hollingsworth, in Holloway, North London. She didn't want it to end unless it ended properly. Finch still wanted to feel the law come over her, like a storm.

Hollingsworth looked like an old-fashioned train station. The gardens were formal and small and made Finch very miserable. The trimmed hedges and coy circles of flowers. She spent time in the gardens only on the exceptional occasions that her mother visited, the two of them walking a constrictive figure eight while Finch's mother worried a set of rosary beads, discreetly weeping, and Finch marvelled at her mother's two curious pairs of eyebrows as they got going, the real pair crumpling beneath the fake, which sat a whole inch higher, drawn in pencil. For her part, Finch's mother believed the correct ending was Catholicism. Her daughter need only return to the Church and prostrate herself before the Lord. But Finch disliked the little she understood of Christ on his mount, in your soul, with his body, and his blood, in *your* body. She didn't want anybody *in* there.

In her third year in Hollingsworth, the man who had raped Finch was prosecuted for the rape of someone else. Finch followed the trial in the paper and wept at his dissonant grin, a family photograph on page 3. But she was glad at the lengthy sentence, felt again the mightiness of the law. Soon after, she finished a B.A. degree in pure and applied maths. This period also heralded the great Golden Age of Finch's weight gain, when every day her fellow-residents could see significant development, like commuters passing a building site. Finch stopped being able to look people in their eyes. She became increasingly stationary, and spent an Easter in a lazy chair, reading "Clarissa." It took almost two weeks to read its 1,892 pages, and when she was finished Finch stared at the last page several minutes, flicked it back, flicked it forward, and wondered what account she could possibly give of herself to her social worker that afternoon.

She lived on in this stasis, twenty years of it. No longer Rosalind Gordon, not yet Finch, nothing, really, except an ongoing therapeutic project for those so inclined, an anecdotal footnote in a young man's Ph.D. Then, when she was forty-three, the facility in Holloway was told it had to close. There were no funds to fix the crumbling red brickwork, the damp. Finch was brought into the director's office, and her options were outlined as she gazed over his shoulder to the gardens, where a man was forcing a cage over a hedge so that it might be trimmed into the shape of a sheep. Not caring to go to Wales or Devon to institutions that were unsuitable—high-security mental-health facilities, both of them—Finch decided to leave.

Finch's mother was sufficiently well off and there was a mazy family flat going begging in Kew. Wary of the family name on the lease, Finch's mother sold this and bought for Finch the small place in Hampstead, so close to the Heath itself that the trees practically stretched their branches through the living room. Ruth Finch moved in. Tried to get used to bedrooms without emergency cords and kitchen drawers with knives in them. Wore red a lot (she thought it made people happy). Bought a complete set of Proust. Met Claire and Karen and Jemima. Certainly they wondered how Finch had got to be the way she was, but there was something about Finch that precluded the usual questions of country and blood. And all three women quickly learned not to try to talk to Finch about the personal. Finch might know the height and weight of your husband, his favorite wines, but she shrank back from any truly personal discussion, sexual or otherwise. Finch had no emotional vocabulary. "*I have always thought the actions of men the best interpreters for their thoughts*," John Locke had said, and Finch kept this and a rattlebag of other personally chosen daily motivational quotes pinned up around the house, as her therapists had recommended. She believed in the sovereignty of other people! She didn't want to be cut open and examined. She didn't want to do it to anybody else, either.

Every two years or so, Finch silently endured the circling English tabloids, which, when they grew bored in the late summer, wondered where she was. In what people were now calling the "public imagination," Finch was one of a very exclusive and notorious band of Englishwomen whose curling passport photos inspired extraordinary repulsion, vengeance. People wanted her to burn in Hell. People thought hanging was too good for her. Fortunately for Finch, she exited the world as a child and subsequently left no traces. No credit cards, no numbers, no addresses. Orange hair was the only continuity between tiny, thin-eyed Rosalind with her crooked nose, and bifocalled enormous Finch with her improbable, bashful grin. To terrorize herself, she sometimes gave over a moment to considering how fast the story might travel if it were released, *so fast!*

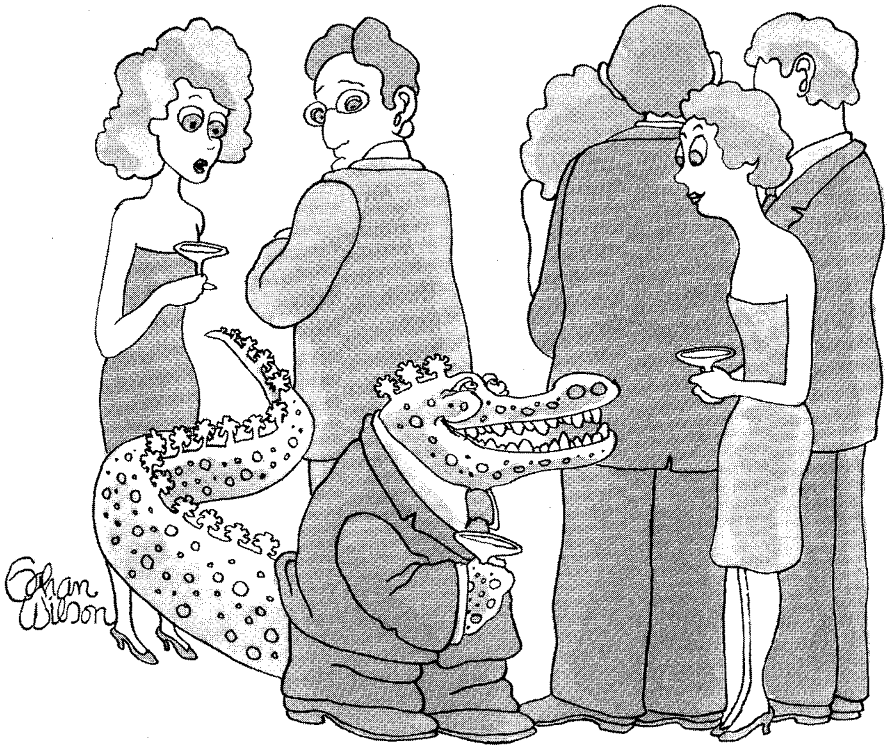
SOMEBODY ELSE'S BAD DAY

Clearly, it was an administrative oversight, but Finch took it as fate. She was a juror. With all that this entailed: a blue suit, a notebook, a cheese-and-onion sandwich. Finch was here, as a representative of her society, to sit in judgment upon the aberration of one of its members, a young woman from the Balkans called Danitsa. Danitsa had had a bad day. Danitsa stabbed Paul in the stomach with a four-inch kitchen blade! Twice! Although he looked fine now, which was confusing for Finch. The salient points were these: Danitsa had very tightly curled hair that shimmered with deliberate grease; she wore her blusher in the Eastern European style, a slice of pink along the cheekbone. She had tried to kill this man Paul, who looked like a bloodhound on its hind legs. Danitsa claimed not to be a prostitute, but everybody else said she was. Either way, this did not concern Finch. Danitsa said she was a waitress with a heroin problem who feared for her life when Paul broke down her door looking for his money. Finch couldn't understand the relevance of this. Nobody denied that Danitsa had taken a knife to Paul's hairy dog-belly, not even Danitsa. But there was contention about other things: how thoroughly she had been beaten that day, how often raped in the past, how thoroughly brought to the brink, how rightful in her final, stabbing motion. Not guilty, self-defense. The argument was offered and countered over a period of five days. Very little of it interested Finch. She concentrated on the initial, stark description of the stabbing. The depth, the damage, the missed organ, the intention. Once she'd heard all of that in the first hours of the first day, she was satisfied. Finch rested back in her second-row chair and unobtrusively began to read "Jude the Obscure," holding the book with the roll of her belly and laying a coat over her lap. She studied the jurors. The black lady in the pleated skirt, the elderly white lady who wore glasses only to read, the young man with no hair at all, the man with one slug eyebrow inching across his forehead, the pretty young lady whose head was completely shaved and shone, the fellow whose teeth—

"Finch? Are you O.K.? Was it upsetting?" asked Karen, after the first night, as she helped heave Finch up into her huge car. The women had agreed that it was too dark at night to cross the Heath; they would take turns ferrying Finch back from the court. Finch was in a state of extreme something, agitated, shaking, and Karen switched off the engine and turned to her.

"These things," said Karen, kindly, "can be quite a trial—excuse the pun—Finch, do you want to talk about it, without actually of course talking about it? We could get tea."

"The law is so beautiful," said Finch seriously. "Really beautiful, it's really the



"He seems an awful lot bigger in his movies."

only beautiful thing there is," and this became one of Finch's famous gnomic utterances, added to the many that Karen and Jemima and Claire would quote whenever evidence of Finch's uniqueness was required. "It's as if," Finch said, "when I'm there, in there, everything orders itself, completely itself, by itself."

But the second day was a bore. In the car afterward, Finch was subdued, her enthusiasm gone. With the same nonchalance she brought to the quick solving of a maths puzzle, Finch told Jemima that she had already made her decision.

"Finch, darling, it really isn't *fair* to," Jemima said. "I mean, you must hear both sides of the thing. And you can't *read* while it's going on. You'll get thrown out. It's important to pay attention to all the details. These things are very complex. . . ."

Jemima faded. Finch was silent, resolutely twiddling with the radio dial. Jemima was oppressed by a feeling she'd never had before with Finch; as if Finch did not, in truth, like her very much. It was a cold thrum, a hint of something bottomless and angry.

The third day, Paul took the stand and Finch woke a little from her reverie. She was immensely moved by Paul and his testimony. He should have been dead, but wasn't. This seemed very significant to Finch. She softened slightly to Danitsa that day, and felt all might be made right if she would just run to Paul in that tall box and tell him (and Finch, and her jury) how very sorry she was. This didn't happen. Nothing happened. Finch could feel the colossal impatience in her jury; she knew how much they all wanted to stand with Finch and give the judgment.

On the penultimate day, Finch climbed into Claire's car and, like a mournful dog, stuck her head out of the open window and kept it there, looking backward, cold air streaming in. Claire had a theory that Finch was in love. A juror, maybe? When finally Finch turned in her seat, Claire saw that the skin around her fingernails had been bitten down horribly, sore, bleeding.

"Finch, you are fine, aren't you?" she asked, but received no answer, only a rather heartbreaking grunt. "We thought we all might have dinner on Saturday, celebrate the end of your duty."

Finch threw her head back and whimpered.

"Who are you trying to impress in that hat, Finch? You look super."

Finch abruptly perked up, frowned. "Couldn't wear it in court, Claire! Couldn't at all!"

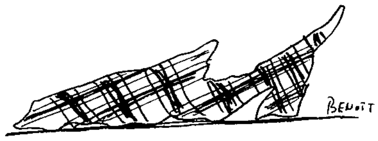
"Why?" asked Claire, tickled by Finch's outrage. "Concealed weapons, or . . . ?"

"Distracting to the jury," said Finch, firmly. "We all have to concentrate, be of the same mind, the exact same. A hat like this could potentially ruin the equilibrium, ruin the equilibrium completely. They have to *understand* me."

"I see," said Claire with equal firmness, and smiled, and later phoned Karen to tell her the story of how the endlessly amusing hat that Geoff had wanted to give the bitch had now extended itself, almost endangering Finch's silly trial.

EPISTOLARY FINCH

Finch was sad to see the trial end; it had been a place for her to be in authority. No one in that courtroom knew, as Finch did, how an act like Danitsa's demands an answer. Demands it! Finch was devastated, that final day, to have to leave this place where she might do so much good, today, tomorrow. Why not let Finch on all juries, make her the eternal juror? The judge, seeing things differently, sent them all out together to deliberate. It was a long walk. But when Finch and her fellow-jurors entered the allotted room she understood that the greatest of all moments was now upon her. The judgment. She imagined a trial as a cruel story one must satisfy with a cruel ending; twelve people of one mind rising and ending the thing. She never for a moment thought they would see Danitsa any differently than she did, Finch, who saw only the one, indisputable, eloquent fact. Once they were settled around the table, Finch stood up. She was the first to speak, and at length, and with many excitable repetitions, as was her way. Guilty! And thumped the table. When she opened her eyes, her heart broke. Eleven wary faces. So familiar. The nervous, amused glances. The agreement to isolate Finch, who might be mad, or might be harmless, but must certainly not be allowed her three dimensions, her time, her space. Finch sat down. The man with the slug eyebrow unpeeled the top of his coffee and let the steam rise to occupy the silence. He said, "I suppose I feel there's a bit more complexity here," and there was grateful murmuring and then agile discussion, and Finch saw clearly, enviously, how this man who did not look odd, or sound odd, could position himself with ease as the leader, while Finch was reduced to a slump on the table, examining the polished fake grain of the fake wood. All she could do was not move from her position. This had always been Finch's power, not to move. Her rebel jury talked, disgusted her with their arguments for self-defense, and Finch resisted them all, and would not even be bowed when it became personal, when the black lady, exasperated, said that Finch was obviously mad.



"Surely we don't have to *deal* with this?" said the black lady, canvassing the room with her eyes. Another woman, in jeans, self-consciously more working class than the rest and feeling bullied by the slug-man, tepidly defended Finch.

"If you stab someone with a knife, then you've stabbed someone with a knife and there's gonner be consequences, in't there?"

But Finch made it happen. She forced the deliberations on so late that the jury had to repair to a grotesque travel tavern, all heaving resentment in the minivan, as Finch sat apart, at the back, chewing at her fingers. They were roomed along a dark-green hallway. In the slam of each door, Finch felt violence directed toward her. She woke up in the early hours needing the toilet, but in the unfamiliar room she saw herself as she was, naked from the waist down, weeping, her top half wobbling in a thermal vest like a Christmas pudding in its muslin, with her dog's paw going and going at a blank space where she imagined a doorknob should be. Other people were not what one expected, one couldn't know them, never know them! Finch fumbled her way back to the bed, tried to sleep again. An hour later, she rose in the thin orange light, and snatched her glasses purposefully from the nightstand. She sat at the desk and took out the hotel writing paper and the pen. She wrote a long letter to the jury (she addressed it, To the

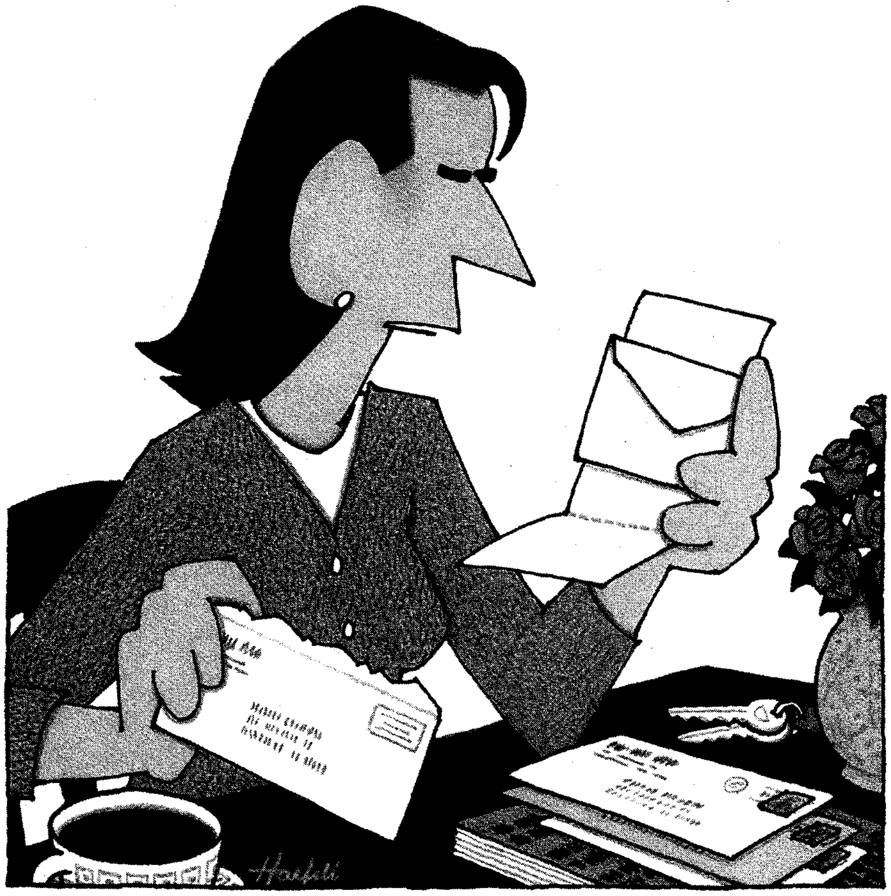
Jury), in which she stated the grounds for her authority and made a full account of herself, her personal experience. Her claim that would wipe out all other claims. When she'd finished, she opened the sliding cupboard and removed the white towelling dressing gown. This only just allowed Finch to cover up the vitals, splitting wildly at the leg, turning Finch into a blowsy showgirl. And what a performance. She took her letter and padded down the hall, stood shaking outside slug-man's door, paused, turned back, and then returned in a rush, running back up the corridor. She recalled some advice of Jemima's that had helped all the ladies through the violence of divorce. If you have something to say, say it in a letter. No one interrupts you in a letter. Have the last word. It's your story, so you tell it.

FINCH IS JUSTICE

Finch's jury meets again in the afternoon. She can see they have all breakfasted together, without her. Everybody sits round the table in odd postures of pity and disgust, legs folded and bent in a double helix. Finch stands alone by the coffee machine, pressing down on the dispenser for something hot while every human feeling for her seeps from the room. The jury's idea is that Danitsa, at least, was a victim. Finch never was. She was never elevated to one, never got that far, never will. Finch knows she is being looked at, and read. Read backward. Were there signs? Could one have seen? Didn't she always seem rather?

Now: how fast will this story go? In the courtroom that same day, as the jury stands, Finch is photographed. *So fast!* Outside the court, no one is there to pick her up. *So fast!* She pushes onto a bus, and this same, lone photographer appears in front of her. She knows there'll be more at the house. She walks the Heath very slowly, as Keats must have, thinking of trees. Their long lives, beyond reproach. Finch spots her favorite kind of conker and pockets it, tracing her fingers over the rounded contours that are shocked out of their complacency by one straight edge. Oh, to understand poetry! To Finch, this is the height of sophistication! To understand that the moment—crystalline, encased in amber words, perfect—is enough. To be all done with stories!

Lucky that Finch carries her bulk out front like a rugby man; when the time comes, she barges through the people-forest and very nearly makes it to her front door without raising her head to a flashbulb—only, someone calls her old name. She turns. An old woman, dressed smartly like a politician, says something quiet and obscene.



"Your generous contribution helps fund these solicitations."

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FINCH'S ALCHEMY

But Finch's bottom, emergent from shower, is a harvest moon; a great and uneven white surface through which rises insistent pink. Her dungarees hang limp over a chair in the other room. Her gloves are on the sofa in the front room. Her Wellingtons stand backwardly right-left in the hallway under a Hogarth reproduction in which people as fat as Finch tumble about. A comb rests against the clouded mirror, and with this Finch's heavy red helmet of hair will be created tomorrow and the day that comes after tomorrow. Because Finch makes it happen. She made it happen. She wonders, Who will help Finch move this final time? Where will she go? What will happen next? Messages from her three friends interlace recklessly on the machine in the other room, and Finch can hear them, like mermaids, singing to each other. They are all faultlessly sympathetic and upset, attentive in an unfamiliar, remarkable way that makes Finch feel she is taking on the dimensions of a character. And, yes, she remembers that Karen has a people-carrier, a monster car (which was no indulgence—she bought it for Sophie, Jono, Polly, and Adam, and the dog, and there used to be Simon, of course—so she needed it), and she understands that the car and its driver are at Finch's disposal should she need to get away for a few days. Or for a lifetime. There are people at the window now. This is extraordinary. Finch stands before the mirror with one arm up, naked, new, exuberantly doused in talcum powder. ♦

FICTION

THE TRICKLE-DOWN EFFECT

BY ANNIE PROULX

Deb Sipple had had it both ways—easy and hard. It had been easy when he was a kid lording it over his two sisters, enjoying the run of the ranch he'd believed would someday be his, getting first pick of the horses, hacking chunks off the don't-touch devil's-food cake the cook had made for dinner. But as he got older the easy edges fell off. The ranch had gone to the Elk Tooth bank, his sisters lived in Oregon, there were no more good horses left, and he'd developed an allergy to chocolate. In a search for the famous solace of open spaces, he'd built up a drinking habit. By the early age of thirty Deb had been married twice, and it hadn't taken permanently either time, despite the fact that he had small feet and a big pecker. Modern women had different standards than their grandmothers. Both wives had named alcohol abuse and Deb's lack of steady income as crucial factors in the breakups. He smoked, too, but not much was made of that. Jeanine called him a sorry shit; Paula cried large round tears, said she loved him still but would be leaving him for a sheep rancher the coming weekend.

"What. You are runnin' off with some mangy sheepherder."

"Not a sheepherder. Rancher. He owns a sheep ranch."

"Sure he does. And if you are goin', don't do me no favors to wait for the weekend. Get the hell out *right now*." And he helped her pack by throwing makeup pots and jars, sewing machine, and other female accoutrements into the yard.

Deb's only asset was his flatbed truck. Most of what little money he made with occasional hauling funnelled straight into Elk Tooth's three bars, what bar-tender Amanda Gribb called the Wyoming trickle-down effect. He would run up a big tab at the Pee Wee, and when Amanda leaned on him he switched to the Silvertip and the Pee Wee saw him not. When the Silvertip debt began to be mentioned, he favored Muddy's Hole and dropped hints that he was looking for a job or two. Everyone understood that he wasn't interested in a real job but in a few days' work. Sooner or later something came up, and when he collected he'd hit the Pee Wee, pay off his tab, and start a new one. So went the cycle of Deb Sipple's years, measured in bar bills and small work.

Wyoming had been dry as a quart of sand for three years and Elk Tooth was in the heart of the drought disaster zone. Those ranchers who had held on to their herds hoping for rain were caught like mice. As the summer drew to its stove-lid end, the most precious commodity to those in the cow business was hay, and the prices demanded for it matched the prices for rubies. Ranchers spent hours on the telephone and searching the Internet for reasonably priced hay. No flimsy or wild rumor could be ignored. If a rancher heard of hay up in Saskatchewan that a seller described simply as "not moldy," she'd try for it.

Most of the desperate ranchers were women, for in Elk Tooth lady ranchers abound, some who had stepped into ownership when a husband rancher died, some the mature daughters of men who had sired no male heirs, some ex-C.E.O.s who had tossed up everything and headed for the high country, as close to Jackson as they could get.

One of the ranchers was Fiesta Punch, a good horsewoman but rough on the hired help. She ran Red Cheerios, a weird brand of exotics with white rings around their eyes her grandfather had bred up, but this summer their range was so badly gnawed it resembled the surface of an antique billiard table in an attic heavily populated by moths. There was no point in selling. The market was glutted and prices lower than break-even. And she wanted to hold on to what was probably the only herd of Red Cheerios in existence. She had to get her hands on enough hay to carry them through the fall and winter. She owed that much to family heritage.

RICK CHAPMAN "HAYROLL, MICHIGAN" (1995)/RICCO/MARESCA GALLERY

The double trouble with scarce hay was that, in addition to paying through the nose for the stuff, once she finally located some, she then would have to face fearsome transport charges. The only decent hay grew in distant parts and hay transporters knew a penned turkey when they saw one. Hauling the hay from Farmer X to Rancher Z could double the cost of the precious bales. Fiesta Punch was in a position to lose her shirt. On the other pan of the scale, Deb Sipple, with his big flatbed truck, could almost guarantee himself several years of elbow security at the Pee Wee.

Ms. Punch was hunched over her account books one night alternately adding figures and cracking her knuckles when the phone rang.

"Fiesta?"

"Yes."

"You don't know me, but this is the friend of a friend."

"Friend of a friend?" She could hear country-and-Western music—Dwight Yoakam's rock-drill voice—in the background. "What is it? You want to talk about urban legends?"

"What?"

"Never mind. What can I do for you? I'm kind a busy."

"I know where you can git you some good hay. Good hay."

"Where might that be? Shangxi Province? The Upper Volta Region?"

"No, just up there in Westconston. I got a friend in Cooke City and his cousin Björn got hay. It's not so droughty up there."

"Two or three bales, right?"

"Wrong. He got eighty bales. Them big round ones, them thousand-pound ones you need a bale fork to lift."

"Let me see if I got this straight. Your friend is in Cooke City, Montana, and his cousin with the hay is in Wisconsin."

"Uh-huh."

"What kind of money does he want for it?" Wisconsin hay was expensive.

The caller named a ridiculously low figure, seventy dollars a ton, the cost of hay three years earlier.

"Must be full a weeds and thistles."

"It's good hay. You can drive up there, look at it. But you better be fast, he won't have it long. So far you're the only one knows about it." He gave her Björn's phone number in Disk, Wisconsin.

"So how come I'm the lucky rancher gets to hear about this great hay?" she said, but her question fell on a dead connection.

She flew up to La Crosse, rented the airport's last available car, and drove out to Disk. Björn Smith was a thready blond in his forties with a round head and beaky orange nose that gave him the look of a seagull. He showed her the hay, stowed in a capacious, fragrant barn. It was prime alfalfa hay, holding green. She pulled out a handful and looked at it—there was a high proportion of leaf to stem, and it was pliable and clean. She noticed it had been cut in the bud stage. There was nothing like Wisconsin alfalfa hay.

"First cutting?" she asked.

Björn nodded. "I could a sold it at the hay auction for more, but Deb said you was a friend and needed hay bad. I guess you got a mean drought over there in Wyoming?"

She twisted her mouth in sardonic agreement, paid him on the spot. There goes almost six grand, she thought.

"I'll get Deb come pick it up soon's I can," she said, folding the bill of sale into her wallet.

"Sooner the better. I want a get out a here."

"Givin' up farmin'?"

"Yeah. Goin' a film school at U.C.L.A."

"No kiddin'. Like learnin' how to make movies?"

"That's right. I got ideas."

"Oh," said Fiesta Punch, "we all got them." Then, more kindly, "I hope you make it."

Deb Sipple was in Muddy's Hole cutting the dust with his eleventh beer and seventh cigarette when Fiesta Punch came through the door and looked around, then headed for him as if following a chalk line drawn across the floor.

"Hello, Deb. That's a filthy habit. Everbody else but you give up smokin'. Anyways, I bought some hay up in Wisconsin and I want you to go pick it up as soon as possible. Tomorrow."

"West*con*ston! Hell, that's halfway across the country. That's the other side a the Mississippi. It's almost in New York."

"Not quite. It's in Disk, just over the Iowa line. As I think you know, so don't play dumb." She knew who the anonymous caller had been. "Speed is necessary. Your pal Björn wants to split, and I need the hay. It's a couple trips for you."

He put on a sly face. "You know I'm goin' a bite your red rosy ass with a heavy price."

"That's what I come to discuss."

"I got to ask two dollars fifty a ton."

"I'll take it!" She could hardly believe her ears. She had been expecting to hear twenty or thirty dollars per ton.

"Per mile," said Deb Sipple.

Fiesta Punch figured the damage rapidly. It was give or take nine hundred miles to Disk, Wisconsin. Eighty tons times two dollars and fifty cents was two hundred dollars per mile times give or take nine hundred miles was—no way.

"That's what I call a highway holdup. That's over a hunderd eighty thousand dollars. That's more'n the herd's worth. I guess the spirit a Butch Cassidy ain't dead yet."

"Fiesta, you could drive up there yourself in your pickup, bring it back a ton at a time. Or you could rent one a them U-Hauls. Shouldn't take you more'n a few weeks a git her done if you work at it steady."

"You know I can't do that. I got responsibilities here. I got bovines need lookin' after. Tell you what, I'll pay you fifty dollars a ton and no mileage charge. It comes to about four grand. I can afford that, just barely, and you will make out like a pig in a feather bed."

"Oink, oink," said Deb Sipple. "Make it five." Fiesta Punch nodded grimly.

Someone put money in the jukebox and Dwight Yoakam began to sing.

A PRIVATE MATTER

You, Never-You, the new vessel.
Dark/light of the sprung soul.

Flung upward or shuddered
up-ringing, iridescent as a fountain:

eyes flickering wide open in sleep.
And on the kitchen sideboard

your old script pages, flipped over,
cut up into memo-pad size. If someone

jots a note, turns it over—
there are the words, dialogue of

people you once became or not.
Laura says she cannot command the

space station alone any longer, can't
he see this? Brent says he knows, he

knows what she has been going through.
I don't know what these words are for—

just as I know you will arrive no more
to counter this argument. You may

have said these things aloud. You walked,
you lay once beside me. Albert says suddenly

from a paper square: "Vague. Cryptic. Enigmatic.
Ambiguous." Claude says, "How do you mean?"

I want to enter every semblance of you—
profile, ideogram, rainlight, zigzag kite,

shifting plinth. Even this comment
from Mohammed: "I should be going—

this is a private matter." Earlier, Frieda
has said, "You're upsetting me, Ira."

The first trip was easy. Deb Sipple drank a beer with Björn, had the truck loaded and secured in two hours, the hay bales lined up to make two huge cylinders. On the way back he took a northern route, stopped in Albert Lea, Minnesota, a town whose crimson past has faded to pink but where Deb Sipple had no trouble finding the Electric Silo, a honky-tonk where he took on some personal freight that gave him a bad headache by 4 A.M. In South Dakota he stopped for four cups of coffee and a bison steak and, after a cigarette and a piece of apple pie, was feeling well enough to continue. Fiesta Punch had him unload the hay in the pasture near her main gate.

"I'll pay you for the whole run when you bring the second load," she said, then relented under the force of his pitiable pleading and paid him a hundred on account.

The second trip was notable in every evil way. He got off to a bad start by picking up a female hitchhiker who told him she'd been in prison in Florida with Aileen Wuornos, the serial killer, whom she counted as her best friend. He made an excuse to stop at a service station and when, at his suggestion, she got out to use the ladies' room he took off. To steady his nerves, he visited Albert Lea again and so missed the weather report warning of a wind-

Let me consider this private matter in anger,
in terror, in reverence. Voiceless, let me

consider a thumbprint, a top-sheet,
margin shout. Here's Marc crying, "Bullshit.

How can a man live in any other time but
his own?" At the tombstone, the fire pit,

at the anchor dragged brain-red over
consciousness, Yvan says, "I don't see why

I have to put up with your tantrums." In
this private matter, I refuse the lilac, the

anemone, all the lit banked candles.
Rachel says he's in the middle of nowhere,

without an alibi. Bring me no alibi.
Bring me instead one sprig, pale-white,

of your never-endlessness, one pulse-leap
inside the sick brilliant rose of your not-being.

Holden says, "That's my girl." Fire-rose, ash,
drawn petalled, unpetalled, along my wall of

solitude. You hover, eyelit, at falcon-height—
and Serge cries, "Read Seneca!" Laura is alone

in the space station, weeping. I am not weeping.
I am emptying the pockets of my own monologues.

I am listening to the semblances, what you were,
who you've been. "You're disastrously open-minded,"

a fragment says (it seems) to me, though I ask for
no feedback here in my space station, here in my former

life, where there is no gravity—or crushing gravity—
in my kitchen, my open mind. Where I
listen closely to no connections. To no you, David. No you.

—*Carol Muske-Dukes*

storm in the coming days, and when he pulled into Björn's it was well past midnight. The hay man was not pleased and told him to sleep in his truck until daylight.

It was noon before he woke up. It took four hours to load the hay, partly because the wind was gusting to sixty, partly because Deb Sipple was distracted to find he had smoked all his cigarettes in Albert Lea and his host laughed cruelly when he asked for tobacco. Then he discovered he had forgotten to bring the tarp.

"What the hell, it gets wet it gets wet, right?"

It is no fun to drive a big rig loaded with round hay bales under a dark sky in a high wind with a hangover and the cigarette fits, but that's how it was for Deb Sipple. When once again he came to Albert Lea it was nightfall and natural to pull into the Electric Silo, a bar he ranked second only to the Pee Wee. He thought briefly about moving to Minnesota. He apologized to the comely bar girl (who remembered him by name) for drinking only four beers, explained that he was in a hurry, bought three packs of cigarettes for the road, and said good night. Outside the wind had lessened a little and he could see something like stars overhead. The weather was clearing.

But the scanty number of beers left him with a gnawing, unsatisfied feeling, and in Rapid City he found Klipper's Klip Joint, which had everything he wanted, from cheap shots to foaming on-tap to Dwight Yoakam songs. At some point two men carried him out to his truck and heaved him up into the seat, told him to sleep it off. But hardly had they gone back inside than he was bolt upright behind the wheel and fumbling for his cigarettes. A cigarette going, it was only natural to start up and drive and in a half an hour he'd found his way out of Rapid City with its crazy double street lamps and whirling traffic lights and was sailing west on I-90. The minute he hit the Wyoming line he felt better, opened the third pack, and lit another cigarette to celebrate a return to his home state. It was a jolt to find he already had a cigarette going, but he threw the half-smoked one out the window and rolled on. He got off the interstate as soon as he could, dimly aware that it would not be the best time for a conversation with a state trooper. By the time he turned onto the road for Sack with Elk Tooth only forty miles beyond, he had tossed fourteen burning cigarettes out the window and many of them had nuzzled into hay bales.

Deb Sipple's return was the closest thing to a meteor ever seen in Elk Tooth, his truck a great fiery cylinder hurtling through the darkness. Those who missed seeing it have to depend on the reports of the fortunate few who were awake at that hour. The most vivid account will come from Fiesta Punch, who lost not only the burned cargo but the bales he'd delivered earlier, consumed in the myriad grass fires that followed him into town and laid waste the ranch country. The hundred-dollar bill Deb had begged from Fiesta Punch had gone to gasoline and the Electric Silo.

"I guess they're even," said Amanda Gribb. ♦

FICTION

WITHOUT BLOOD

BY ALESSANDRO BARICCO

DETAIL "NINNA NANNA" (1985-87) / © ESTATE OF MARIO GIACOMELLI / PHOTOLOGY MILANO

I

The old farmhouse of Mato Rujo stood blankly in the countryside, carved in black against the evening light, the only stain in the empty outline of the plain.

Four men had arrived in an old Mercedes. The road was pitted and dry. Manuel Roca saw them from the window. First he saw a column of dust rising against the corn. Then he heard the sound of the engine. No one around here had a car anymore. Manuel Roca knew that. The Mercedes emerged in the distance and disappeared behind a line of oaks. Then he stopped looking and returned to the table. He placed a hand on his daughter's head. Get up, he told her. He took a key from his pocket, put it on the table, and nodded to his son. Yes, the son said.

At the crossroads, near the stream, the old Mercedes did not turn off to the farmhouse but continued toward Álvarez. The man driving had on some kind of uniform. The other man sitting in front wore a cream-colored suit. Ironed. He was smoking a French cigarette. One of the two in the back was only a boy.

Manuel Roca heard the sound fade into the distance. Who do they think they're fooling? he thought. He saw his son come back into the room with a gun in his hand and another under his arm. "Put them there," he said. Then he turned to his daughter. "Come, Nina. Don't be afraid. Come here."

Manuel Roca moved some baskets of fruit to one side, bent over, raised a hidden trapdoor, and looked in. It was little more than a hole dug into the earth, like the den of an animal.

"Listen to me, Nina. Some people are coming, and I don't want them to see you. You have to hide in here. The best thing is for you to hide and wait until they go away. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"You just have to stay here quietly."

She stared.

"Whatever happens, you mustn't come out, you mustn't move, just stay quietly here and wait."

She said nothing.

"Everything will be all right."

"Yes."

"Listen to me. It's possible that I might have to go away with these men. Don't come out until your brother comes to get you, do you understand? Or until you can tell that no one is there and it's all over."

"Yes."

"I want you to wait until no one is there."

The child stared.

"Don't be afraid, Nina, nothing's going to happen to you. All right?"

"Yes."

"Give me a kiss."

The girl pressed her lips against her father's forehead. He stroked her hair.

"Everything will be all right, Nina."

He remained standing, as if there were still something he had to say. "This wasn't what I wanted," he said.

Instinctively, the child searched her father's eyes for something that might help her understand. She saw nothing. The father leaned over and kissed her on the lips.

"Now go, Nina. Go on, down there."

The child let herself fall into the hole. The earth was hard and dry. She lay down.

"Wait, take this."

The father handed her a blanket. She spread it on the dirt and lay down again.

She heard her father say something to her, then lower the trapdoor. She closed her eyes and opened them again. Blades of light filtered through the floorboards. Her father went on speaking to her. She heard the sound of the baskets dragged across the floor. It grew darker. Her father asked her something. She answered. She was lying on one side. She had bent

her legs and curled up, as if she were in her bed, ready to go to sleep. Her father said something else, gently. Then she heard a shot, and the sound of a window breaking.

"ROCA! COME OUT, ROCA. DON'T DO ANYTHING STUPID AND COME OUT."

Manuel Roca looked at his son. He crept toward the child, careful not to move into the open. He reached for the gun on the table.

"Get away from there! Go and hide in the woodshed. Don't come out, don't make a sound, don't do anything. Take the gun and keep it loaded."

The child stared at him and didn't move.

"Go on. Do what I tell you."

The child took a step toward him.

A hail of shots swept the house. Dust and bits of glass slid along the floor. A voice called from outside.

"SO, ROCA, DO WE HAVE TO COME AND GET YOU? I'M SPEAKING TO YOU, ROCA. DO I HAVE TO COME AND GET YOU?"

The child remained standing there. He had taken his gun, but was pointing it down, swinging it back and forth.

"Go," said the father. "Did you hear me? Get out of here."

The child took another step. He seemed to be thinking that if he knelt on the floor he would be embraced by his father. Something like that.

The father pointed his gun at his son. He spoke in a low, fierce voice. "Go, or I'll kill you myself."

"LAST WARNING, ROCA."

Gunfire fanned the house, back and forth like the beam of a lighthouse, patiently.

Nina closed her eyes. She flattened herself against the blanket, and curled up even tighter, pulling her knees in to her chest. She felt the earth, cool, under her side, protecting her—it would not betray her. And she felt her own curled-up body, folded around itself like a shell. She liked this. She was shell and animal, shelter of herself—she was everything. Nothing could hurt her as long as she remained in this position. She reopened her eyes, and thought, Don't move, you're happy.

Manuel Roca watched his son disappear behind the door. He raised himself just enough to glance out the window. All right, he thought. He moved to another window, rose, aimed quickly, and fired.

The man in the cream-colored suit cursed and threw himself to the ground. "Look at this bastard," he said. He shook his head. "The son of a bitch." There were two more shots from the farmhouse. Then the voice of Manuel Roca.

"FUCK OFF, SALINAS."

The man in the cream-colored suit spit. "Go fuck yourself, you bastard." He glanced to his right. El Gurre was sneering, flattened behind a stack of wood. He was holding a machine gun in one hand, and with the other he was searching in his pocket for a cigarette. He was in no hurry. He was small and thin. He had a dirty hat and wore enormous mountain clogs. He found the cigarette. He put it between his lips. Everyone called him el Gurre. He began shooting.

Salinas crawled over beside el Gurre.

"How long would it take Tito to get in?" Tito was the boy.

El Gurre shrugged his shoulders. He still had the sneer. Salinas looked back at the farmhouse.

"We'll never get in from here. Either Tito does it or we're in shit."

El Gurre lighted the cigarette. Then he said that the kid was quick and would manage it. He knew how to creep like a snake, and they would have to trust him. "Now we'll make a little distraction."

Manuel Roca saw el Gurre emerge from behind the woodpile and throw himself to the ground. The machine-gun bursts were immediate and prolonged.

Nina adjusted her skirt and began eliminating the imprecisions, one by one. She lined up her feet until she felt her legs perfectly coupled, the two thighs softly joined, the knees like two cups, balanced one on the other, the calves barely separated. She checked the symmetry of her shoes, paired as if in a shopwindow. She liked the orderliness. If you are a shell, order is important. If you are a shell, everything has to be perfect.

She heard the long pounding of a machine gun. And then the voice of a boy. "Put down that gun, Roca."

Manuel Roca turned and saw Tito standing a few yards away, pointing a pistol at him.

"Don't move. Put down that gun."

Outside there was another burst of gunfire. The boy didn't move. Manuel Roca didn't move. The two stood staring at each other, not breathing. Manuel Roca was trying to figure out if the boy was a child or a soldier, if this was his thousandth time or his first, if there was a brain attached to that gun or only blind instinct. The barrel of the gun trembled just perceptibly, as though making a tiny scribble in the air.

"Stay calm, kid," he said.

Slowly Manuel Roca placed the rifle on the floor. With a kick he sent it sliding into the center of the room.

"Everything's O.K., kid," he said.

Tito didn't take his eyes off him. "Quiet, Roca, and don't move."

There was a machine-gun blast. El Gurre was working methodically. The boy waited until the gun stopped, and then glanced toward the window.

"SALINAS! I'VE GOT HIM. STOP. I'VE GOT HIM." And after a moment: "IT'S TITO. I'VE GOT HIM." He looked for the others in the light from the window.

"He's done it. Shit," Salinas said.

El Gurre made a half smile, without turning. He was observing the barrel of the machine gun as if he had carved it himself, in idle hours, from the branch of an ash tree.

"Let's go," Salinas said. They went around the woodpile and headed straight for the house. They were crossing the farmyard when they heard a shot.

El Gurre ran. He reached the door and kicked it open. Three years before, he had kicked open the door of a stable and seen his wife hanging from the ceiling, and his two daughters with their heads shaved, their thighs spattered with blood.

Tito was pointing the gun toward a corner of the room. "I had to do it. He has a gun," he said.

El Gurre looked in the corner. Roca

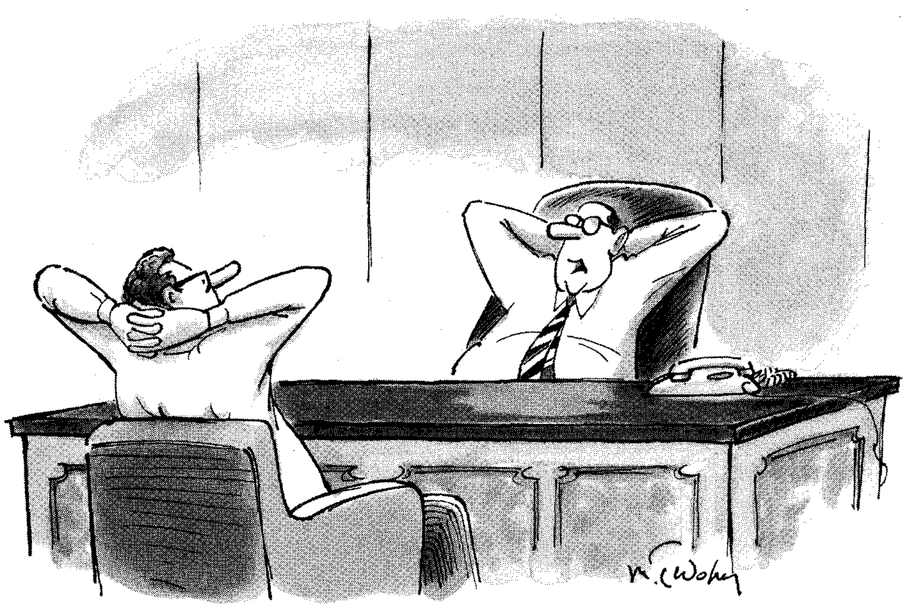
was on his back. He was bleeding from one arm.

"I think he has a gun," Tito said again. "Hidden somewhere."

El Gurre went over to Manuel Roca. He looked at the wound in his arm, and then looked him in the face. "Hello, Roca," he said.

El Gurre put his foot on Roca's wounded arm and began to crush it. Roca shrieked with pain and folded over on himself. The gun slid out of his pants. El Gurre leaned down to pick it up.

"You're a smart kid," he said. Tito nodded. His arm was still extended in front of him, the gun in his hand pointing at Roca. He lowered it. His fingers relaxed around the trigger. His whole hand hurt, as if he had been punching a wall. Stay calm, he thought.



"Rumor has it, Minton, that you're after my job."

• •

Nina remembered the song that began "Count the clouds, the time will come." Then there was something about an eagle. The song ended with all the numbers, one after another, from one to ten. But you could also count to a hundred, or a thousand. She had once counted to two hundred and forty-three. She thought that now she would get up and go and see what these men wanted. If she couldn't open the trapdoor, she could cry out, and her father would get her. But instead she stayed like that, lying on her side, her knees pulled up to her chest, her shoes balanced one on top of the other, her cheek feeling the cool of the earth through the rough wool of the blanket. She began to sing the song under her breath, in a thin voice. "Count the clouds, the time will come."

"We meet again, Doctor," Salinas said. Manuel Roca looked at him without speaking. He pressed a rag against the wound. They had made him sit in the middle of the room, on a wooden chest. El Gurre was behind him, somewhere, gripping his machine gun. They had stationed the boy, Tito, at the door, outside, and every so often he turned and looked into the room. Salinas walked back and forth, a cigarette between his fingers.

Manuel Roca looked up at him. "Tell me what you want and go."

"What I want?"

"What do you want, Salinas?"

Salinas smiled. "What did you say?"

"The war is over."

Salinas stood over Manuel Roca. "The winner decides when a war is over."

Manuel Roca shook his head. "You read too many novels, Salinas. The war is over, that's it, get it?"

"Not yours. Not mine, Doctor."

Then Manuel Roca began shouting that they had better not touch him, that they would be caught and all end up in jail, that they would spend the rest of their lives rotting in prison.

Salinas smiled. He was enjoying himself. He crouched in front of Manuel Roca and told him to be quiet. He put a hand inside his jacket and took out a pistol. Roca needn't worry about them, he said, no one would ever know a thing. "You will disappear into a void, and no one will say a word. You're screwed, Doctor."

"You're mad."

"What are you saying?"

"You're mad."

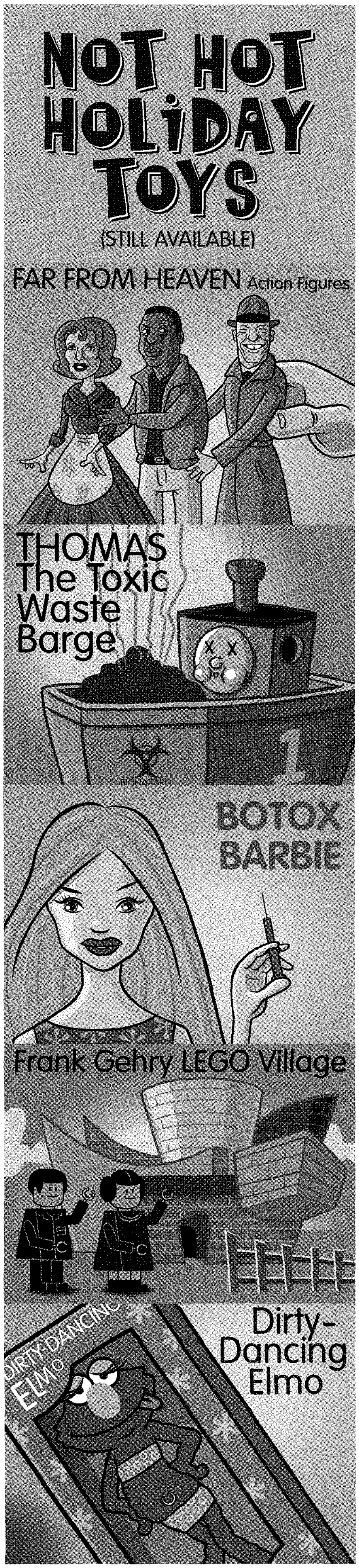
"Say it again, Doctor. I like hearing you talk about madmen."

"Go fuck yourself, Salinas."

Salinas released the safety on the pistol.

"Now listen to me, Doctor. Do you know how many times I fired a shot in four years of war? Twice. I don't like to shoot, I don't like weapons, I've never wanted to carry one. I fought my war sitting at a desk. Salinas the Rat, you remember? That's what your friends called me. I screwed them one by one. I deciphered their coded messages and put my spies on them. They despised me and I screwed them. It went like that for four years, but the truth is that I fired only twice. Once was at night. I shot into the darkness at no one. The other was the last day of the war, when I shot my brother. I'd gone into the hospital before the Army arrived. We wanted to kill all of you, but we didn't find you. You had fled. You saw how the wind was blowing, so you took off your jailers' shirts and ran, leaving everything behind, just as it was, sick people everywhere, even in the corridors. But what I remember most was that you couldn't hear a thing, not a sound, nothing. Every night of my life I will hear that absolute silence. In the beds were our friends and we were going to free them, but they welcomed us in silence. They didn't have the strength to cry. They no longer had a desire to live. You had reduced them to a state where they didn't want to be saved, they wanted only to die.

"I found my brother in a bed in the chapel. I tried to speak to him, but he didn't answer. I couldn't tell if he recognized me. I bent over him. I asked him to tell me something, I begged him. His eyes were wide open, his breath was very slow. 'Please,' a voice



MICHAEL WELDON

said, very slowly, with a superhuman effort. The voice seemed to come from Hell. It had nothing to do with his voice. My brother had a ringing voice. When he spoke it was like laughter, but this was something entirely different. 'Please,' he said slowly, and then, after a while, he said, 'Kill me.' His eyes had no expression, none. They were like the eyes of someone else. His body was motionless—only this very slow breath.

"I said I would take him away, that it was all over and I would take care of everything. What could I do? How could I take him away from there? I looked around for help. I couldn't move. I don't know how much time passed. At a certain point I turned and saw el Blanco. He was standing beside a bed, with a machine gun on his shoulder, and crushing a pillow over the face of a boy. El Blanco was crying and crushing the pillow. In the silent chapel only his sobs could be heard. The boy wasn't moving, he didn't make a sound, but el Blanco was sobbing, like a child. Then he took away the pillow and with his fingers closed the boy's eyes, and he looked at me. I wanted to say, 'What are you doing?' but nothing came out of my mouth. Then someone appeared and said that the Army was coming, and we had to get out of there. Others were running along the corridors, and I took the pillow from under my brother's head and gently placed it on his face and began to press it, I pressed down on the pillow, and felt the bones of my brother's face, there under my hands. You cannot ask a man to do such a thing. At some point I stopped. I pulled the pillow away. My brother was still breathing, but it was like something digging up air from the depths of Hell. It was terrible—the eyes unmoving, and that rattle. He looked at me. I was screaming. I heard my voice screaming, but as if from a distance, like a fading lament. I was still screaming when I noticed el Blanco again. He was beside me, offering me a gun, and I took it and placed the barrel against my brother's forehead and, still screaming, I fired.

"Look at me, Roca. I said look at me. In the whole war I fired twice. The first time I fired and it was night. The second time I shot my brother at close range. I will shoot one more time, and that will be the last."

Roca began to shout. "I had nothing to do with it!"

"You had nothing to do with it?"

"I had nothing to do with the hospital."

"What the hell are you saying?"

"I did what they told me to do."

"You . . ."

"I wasn't there when . . ."

"What the fuck are you saying . . ."

"I swear it, I . . ."

"That was your hospital, you bastard."

"My hospital?"

"That was your hospital, you were the doctor who was taking care of them, you killed them, you broke them, they were sent to you and you broke them."

"I never . . ."

"SHUT UP!"

"I swear to you, Salinas . . ."

"SHUT UP!"

Salinas placed the gun against one of Roca's knees. Then he fired. The knee exploded like a piece of fruit. Roca fell back and curled on the ground, shrieking with pain. Salinas was standing over him. He aimed the gun at him and went on shouting.

"I'LL KILL YOU, UNDERSTAND? I'LL KILL YOU, I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!"

Salinas was shouting. His cream-colored suit was spattered with blood. He was shouting in a strange, harsh voice, as if he were crying. Or as if he were no longer capable of breathing. He was shouting that he would murder him. Then an impossible voice said something softly.

"Go away."

They turned and saw a boy, standing on the other side of the room. He was holding a rifle and had it pointed at them. He said again, softly: "Go away."

"Who the hell . . ."

"It's the son, Salinas."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"It's Roca's son," el Gurre said.

Salinas cursed. "There wasn't supposed to be anyone here!" He didn't know where to point the gun. He looked at el Gurre, and then at the child with the rifle, and shouted that the boy would not get out of there alive if he didn't put down that damn gun now.

The boy remained silent and kept the gun raised.

Then Salinas stopped. His voice came out calm and fierce. He said to the boy that now he knew what sort of a man his father was. Now he knew that he was an assassin, who had murdered dozens of people. Sometimes he poisoned them little by little, with his medicine, but others he killed by cutting open their chests and then leaving them to die. With his own eyes, he said, he had seen boys leave that hospital with their brains blown out. They could hardly walk, they couldn't speak—they were like idiots. He told the child that his father was called the Hyena. It was his friends who called him the Hyena, and they laughed when they said it. Roca was on the floor gasping. He began to murmur quietly, "Help," as if from far away—"Help, help, help." Salinas didn't look at him. He went on talking to the child, saying that things were like that, and that it was too late to do anything, even with a gun in your hands. He looked the child in the eyes and asked him, with an infinite weariness, if he understood, if he truly understood who this man was. With one hand he indicated Roca.

The boy answered: "He's my father."

Then he fired. A single shot. Into emptiness.

El Gurre responded instinctively, with a machine-gun burst, and the child was lifted up off the floor and hurled against the wall, like a bird shot in mid-flight.

Salinas threw himself to the floor and landed next to Roca. For a moment the two men looked at each other. From Roca's throat came a dim, horrible howl. Salinas slid away and rolled onto his back to get Roca's eyes off him. He began to tremble. He couldn't keep his hands still, his legs, nothing. There was only the horrible howl.

Salinas said faintly: "Make him stop." His teeth were chattering, and as he spoke he was trying to stop them. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling. A line of dark wood beams. Old. "Make him stop," he said.

Roca howled, his mouth hideously wide, and el Gurre stuck the barrel of the gun in his throat. Roca kept on howling, against the warm metal of the barrel. El Gurre fired. A short burst. Dry. The last of his war.

"Make him stop," Salinas said again.

Nina heard the silence and it frightened her. She slipped her hands between her legs. She curled up even tighter, bringing her knees toward her head. It must be over by now, she thought. Her father would come to get her and they would not speak of this night again. Soon they would forget about it. She thought this because she was a child and still couldn't know.

"The girl," said el Gurre. He held Salinas by the arm, to make him stand up. He said to him quietly: "The girl."

Salinas's gaze was blank. "What girl?"

"Roca's daughter. If the boy was here she probably is, too."

El Gurre nodded at Tito, directing him toward the kitchen. When Tito passed the boy on the floor, he bent down for an instant and closed his eyes. Not like a father. Like someone who turns off the light as he is leaving a room.

Tito thought of his own father's eyes. One day some men had knocked on the door of his house. Tito had never seen them before. They said they had a message and handed him a canvas sack. He opened it and inside were the eyes of his father. Take care which side you stand on, kid, they said, and they went away.

At the other end of the kitchen was a drawn curtain. Tito released the safety of his pistol and parted the curtain. Behind it was a small room. Everything was in disarray. Chairs overturned, trunks, tools, and some baskets of half-rotted fruit. There was a strong smell of food gone bad. And of dampness. The dust on the floor looked as if someone had dragged his feet through it.

El Gurre was on the other side of the house, beating the walls with his machine gun, looking for hidden doors. Tito moved one of the fruit baskets. He made out the line of a trapdoor. He hit the floor hard with one boot, to hear what sound it made. He moved two more baskets. It was a small trapdoor, carefully cut out. Tito looked up. Through a small window he saw that it was dark outside. He hadn't even realized that it was night. It was time to go. He knelt on the floor and lifted the trapdoor. There was a girl inside, curled up on her side, her hands hidden between her thighs, her head bent forward slightly, toward her knees. Her eyes were open.

Tito pointed his gun at her.

"Salinas!" he shouted.

The child had dark eyes, oddly shaped. She looked at him without expression. Her lips were half closed and she was breathing calmly. Tito felt a sensation he'd had a thousand times, finding that exact position, between warm sheets or under the afternoon sun of childhood. Knees folded, hands between the legs, head bent forward slightly. The child's skin was white, and the outline of her lips perfect. Her legs stuck out from under a short red skirt, as if in a drawing. It was all so orderly. Exact.

The girl turned her head away and bent it forward slightly, closing the circle. Tito realized that no one had answered him. He could hear el Gurre banging with his gun against the walls of the house. A muted meticulous sound. He lowered the trapdoor. Slowly. He remained there, on his knees, to see if he could see the child through the cracks in the floor. He would have liked to think. But he couldn't. He got up. He put the baskets back. His heart was pounding against his temples.

They went out into the night like drunks. El Gurre supported Salinas, pushing him forward, Tito walking behind them. Somewhere, the old Mercedes was waiting for them. They went a dozen yards or so without exchanging a word. Then Salinas said something to el Gurre, and el Gurre went back toward the farmhouse. He seemed uncertain, but he went. Salinas leaned on Tito and told him to keep walking. They skirted the woodpile and left the road to take a path that went through the fields. There was a deep silence, but Tito was unable to say the sentence that he had in mind and had decided to say. "There is still a child in there." He was tired, and there was too much silence. Salinas stopped. He was shaking and it was an enormous effort to walk. Tito said something softly, then he turned and looked back. El Gurre was running toward them. Behind him the farmhouse lighted the darkness. Flames shot up and a cloud of black smoke rose slowly in the night. Tito moved away from Salinas and stood petrified, watching. El Gurre joined them. "Let's go, kid," he said. But Tito didn't move.

"What the hell did you do?" he said.

El Gurre was dragging Salinas away. They had to go, he said. But Tito grabbed him by the neck and shouted in his face, "WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO?"

"Calm down, kid," said el Gurre.

But Tito wouldn't stop. He began shouting louder and louder, WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO? shaking el Gurre like a puppet. WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO?—until Salinas, too, began shouting: "STOP IT, KID." Three madmen, shouting at each other, abandoned on a dark stage.

Finally they had to drag Tito away. The glare of the fire lighted up the night. They crossed a field and went down to the road, following the streambed. When they came in sight of the old Mercedes, el Gurre put a hand on Tito's shoulder and said to him softly that he had done a fine job, and that it was all over now. But Tito wouldn't stop repeating the words over and over. He didn't shout. He spoke softly, in a child's voice. What the hell have we done. What the hell have we done. What the hell have we done.

The old farmhouse of Mato Rujo stood blankly in the countryside, carved in red flame against the dark night, the only stain in the empty outline of the plain.

Three days later a man arrived, on horseback, at the farmhouse of Mato Rujo. He was filthy, dressed in rags. The horse was an old nag. It had something in its eyes, a dripping yellow liquid, and flies were buzzing around it.

The walls of the farmhouse stood blackened and useless, coals in the middle of an enormous quenched brazier. They were like the last remaining teeth in the mouth of an old man. The fire had even consumed a large oak that for years had shaded the house.

The man made a half circle around the farm. He went to the well and without getting off the horse unhooked the bucket and let it fall. He heard the slap of metal on water. He looked over at the farmhouse. On the ground, leaning against what remained of a wall, sat a child. She was staring at him, with two motionless eyes shining in a smoke-grimed face. She was wearing a short red skirt. She had scratches all over. Or wounds.

The man pulled up the bucket from the well. The water was blackish. He stirred it with a tin dipper, but the blackness remained. He refilled the dipper, brought it to his lips, and took a long drink. He looked again into the water in the bucket. He spit into it. Then he set everything on the edge of the well and pressed his heels into the belly of the horse.

He came up to the child. She raised her head to look at him. The man studied her. Eyes, lips, hair. Then he held out a hand. She stood, grabbed the man's hand, and pulled herself up to the saddle, behind him. The old nag adjusted its hooves to the new weight and tossed its head. The man made a strange noise, and the horse calmed down.

As they rode away from the farmhouse, at a slow trot, under a fierce sun, the girl let her head fall forward and, with her forehead against the man's sweaty back, slept.

II

The signal changed to green and the woman crossed the street. She looked down as she walked, because it had just stopped raining and in the hollows of the asphalt there were puddles that reminded her of the sudden rain of early spring. She had an elegant gait, dictated by the tight black skirt. She saw the puddles and avoided them.

When she reached the other side she stopped. People passed by, the crowds of late afternoon on the way home. The woman liked to feel the city trickling around her, so she stood for a while, in the middle of the sidewalk, inexplicable, like a woman who had been left there, abruptly, by her lover. She decided to turn right, and fell in with the collective promenade. She walked tall and confident, with a youthful bearing in spite of her age. She had white hair, gathered at the nape and held by a dark comb, like a girl's.

She stopped at the window of an appliance shop and stood staring at a wall of televisions broadcasting a multiplication of the same news commentator. Each was tinted a different color, which fascinated her. A film began of some cities at war and she resumed her walk. She crossed Calle Medina and then the little Plaza del Perpetuo Socorro. When she arrived at the Galería Florencia, she stopped. The grand entrance was marked by an iron arch. She took a few steps inside, then stopped a man. She excused herself, and asked him what the place was called. The man told her. She thanked him and said that he would have a most beautiful evening. The man smiled.

She walked through the Galería Florencia and spotted a small kiosk, twenty yards away. It was one of those kiosks where lottery tickets are sold. She continued walking, but when she was a few steps from the kiosk she stopped. The man who sold the tickets was sitting on a stool, reading a newspaper. He had it resting on something in front of him. All the sides of the kiosk were of glass, except the one that was against the wall of the Galería.

The woman approached and leaned toward the window.

"Good evening," she said.

The man raised his eyes from the newspaper. He was about to say something, but when he saw the woman's face he stopped. He remained like that, looking at her.

"I want to buy a ticket."

The man nodded his head yes. "Have you been waiting a long time?"

"No, why?"

The man shook his head, continuing to stare at her. "Nothing, excuse me," he said.

"I want a ticket," she said.

The man turned and stuck his hand up among the strips of tickets hanging behind him.

The woman pointed to one, longer than the others. "That one there. Can you take it from that strip?"

"This one?"

"Yes."

The man tore off the ticket. He glanced at the number and nodded approval. He placed it on the wooden counter. "It's a good number."

"What did you say?"

The man didn't answer, because he

was looking at the woman's face, as if he were searching for something.

"Did you say it's a good number?"

The man lowered his gaze to the ticket: "Yes, it has two eights in a symmetrical position and has equal sums."

"What does that mean?"

"If you draw a line through the middle of the number, the sum of the figures on the right is the same as those on the left. Generally that's a good sign."

"And how do you know?

"It's my job."

The woman smiled. "You're right." She placed her money on the counter. "You're not blind," she said.

"I beg your pardon?" The man began laughing. "No, I'm not."

"It's odd . . ."

"Why should I be blind?"

"Well, the people who sell lottery tickets always are."

"Really?"

"Maybe not always, but often. I think people like it that they're blind."

"In what sense?"

"I don't know, I imagine it has to do with the business of fortune being blind."

The woman laughed. She had a nice laugh, with no sign of age in it. "Usually they're very old, and they look around like tropical birds in the window of a pet shop." She said it with great assurance. Then she added: "You are different."

The man said that in fact he was not blind. But he was old.

"How old are you?" the woman asked.

"I'm seventy-two," said the man. Then he added: "This is a good job for me, I have no problems."

The woman smiled. "Of course. I didn't mean that."

"It's a job I like."

"I'm sure of it."

She took the ticket and put it in her bag. Then she turned around for an instant as if she had to check something, or wanted to see if there were people waiting behind her. "I wondered if you might like to come and have something to drink with me."

The man had just put the money into the cash drawer. He stopped with his hand in midair.

"Me?"

"Yes."

"I . . . I can't. I have to keep the kiosk open, I can't go now, I have no one here . . ."

"Just a glass."

"I'm sorry. Really I can't do it."

The woman nodded, as if she had understood. But then she leaned toward the man and said: "Come with me."

"Please," the man said.

"Come with me," she repeated.

The man folded the newspaper and got off the stool. He removed his glasses and put them in a case of gray cloth. Then, very carefully, he began to close the kiosk. The woman waited, standing, calmly, as if it had nothing to do with her. Every so often someone passed by and turned to look at her. Because she seemed to be alone, and was not young,

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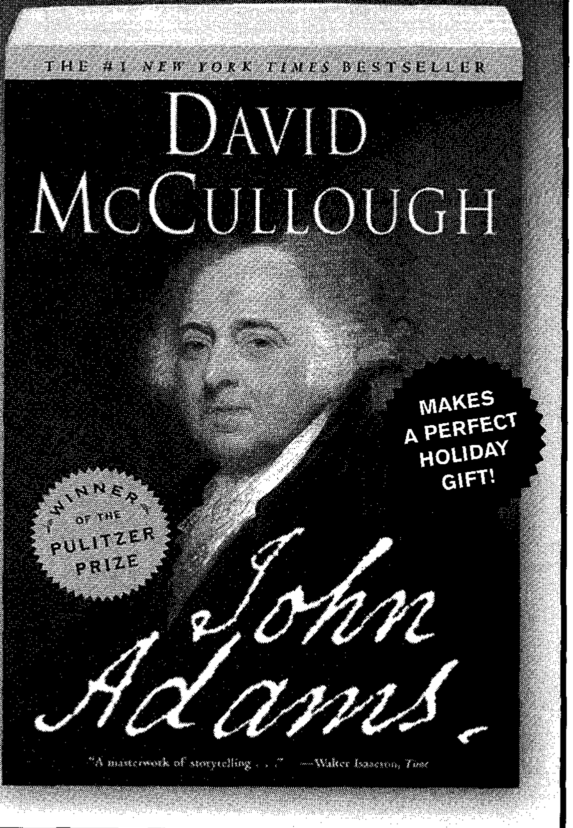
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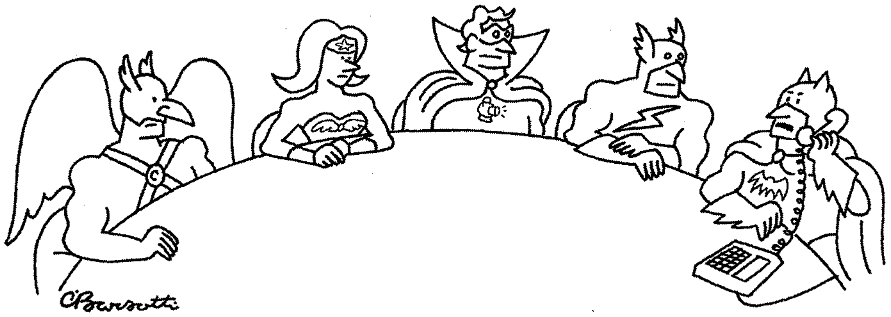

"Yellow? Don't call us until it's at least an orange alert."

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and was beautiful. The man turned off the light. He pulled down the little shutter and fastened it to the ground with a padlock.

"I'm finished."

The woman smiled at him. "Do you know where we could go?"

"Over here. There's a café where one can sit quietly."

They went into the café, found a table, in a corner, and sat down across from one another. They ordered two glasses of wine. The woman asked the waiter if he had cigarettes. So they began to smoke. They spoke of ordinary things, and of people who win the lottery. The man said that usually they couldn't keep the secret, and the funny thing was that the first person they told was always a child. Probably there was a moral in that, but he had never managed to figure out what it was. The woman said something about stories that have a moral and stories that don't. They went on a little like that, talking. Then he said that he knew who she was, and why she had come.

The woman said nothing.

"Many years ago, you saw three men kill your father, in cold blood. I'm the only one of the three who's still alive. You came here to find me." He spoke calmly. "Now you've found me." Then they were silent, because he had no more to say.

"When I was a child my name was Nina," she said. "But everything ended that day. No one calls me by that name anymore. I liked it: Nina. Now I have many names. It's different.

"In the beginning I remember a sort of orphanage. Nothing else. Then a man whose name was Ricardo Uribe came and took me away with him. He was the pharmacist in a little town deep in the countryside. He had no wife or relatives, nothing. He told everyone that I was his daughter. He had moved there a few months earlier. Everyone believed him. In the daytime I stayed in the rear of the pharmacy. Between customers he taught me. I don't know why, but he didn't like me to go out alone. 'What there is to learn you can learn from me,' he said. I was eleven. At night he sat on the sofa and made me lie beside him. I rested my head in his lap and listened to him. He told strange stories about the war. He would caress my hair, back and forth, slowly. Sometimes I felt his sex, under the material of his pants. Then he would kiss my forehead and let me go to sleep. I had a room to myself. I helped him keep the shop clean and the house. I washed and cooked. He seemed a good man.

"One night he leaned over and kissed me on the mouth. He went on kissing me, like that, and he stuck his hands under my skirt. I did nothing. And then, suddenly, he pulled away from me, and began to cry and asked me to forgive him. He seemed terrified. I didn't understand. A few days later he said that he had found me a fiancé. A young man from Río Galván, a town nearby. He was a mason. I would marry him as soon as I was old enough. I went to meet him the following Sunday, in the square. He was a handsome boy, tall and thin, very thin. He moved slowly, maybe he was sick, or something like that. We introduced ourselves, and I went home."

The man thought that the way she spoke was strange. As if it were a gesture that she wasn't used to. Or as if it were not her language. As she searched for words she stared into space.

"A few months later, on a winter evening, Uribe went out to the Riviera, a sort of tavern where men gambled. Uribe went every week, always the same day, Friday. That night he played until very late. Then he found himself with four jacks in his hand, before a pot with more money than he would see in a year. The game was now between him and the Count of Torrelavid. The others had put in a little money and then had let it go. But the Count was stubborn. He kept raising the bet. Uribe was sure of his cards and stayed with him. They reached the point where the players lose any sense of reality. And then the Count put his *fazenda* of Belsito in the pot. In the tavern everything came to a halt. Do you gamble?"

"No," said the man.

"Then I don't think you'll understand."

"Try me."

"You won't understand."

"It doesn't matter."

"Everything came to a halt. And there was a silence you won't understand."

The woman explained that the *fazenda* of Belsito was the most beautiful *fazenda* in that land. An avenue of orange trees led to the house at the top of a hill, and from there, from the house, you could see the ocean.

"Uribe said that he had nothing to bet that was worth Belsito. And he placed his cards on the table. The Count said that Uribe could always bet the pharmacy, and he began to laugh like a lunatic, and some of the men who were there began to laugh with him. Uribe smiled. He still had a hand over his cards. As if to say goodbye to them. The Count became serious again, leaned forward, across the table, and said: 'You have a lovely child, though.'

"Uribe didn't understand right away.

" 'Belsito against your daughter, Uribe. It's an honest offer.'

"And on the table, right under Uribe's nose, he placed his five cards, face down.

"Uribe stared, without touching them. He said something in a whisper, but no one ever told me what it was. Then he slid his cards toward the Count.

"The Count came and got me that night. He did something unpredictable. He waited sixteen months, and when I was fourteen he married me. I gave him three sons.

"Men are difficult to understand. The Count, before that night, had seen me only once. He was sitting in the café and I was crossing the square. He had asked someone: 'Who is that girl?' And they told him."

Outside it was raining again, and the café had filled up. One had to speak loudly, to be understood. Or sit closer. The man said to the woman that she had an odd way of talking. She seemed to be telling the story of someone else's life. "It's as if nothing matters to you."

The woman said that, on the contrary, everything mattered to her, too much. She said that she felt nostalgic for every single thing that had happened to her. But she said it in a hard voice, without melancholy.

Then the man was silent, looking at the people around them. He thought of Salinas. He had been found dead in his bed one morning, two years after that business with Roca. Something with his heart, they said. There was a rumor that his doctor had poisoned him, a little every day, slowly, for months. A slow agony. Horrifying. The doctor's name was Astarte. He had made a little money, during the war, from a preparation that cured fevers and infections. He had invented it himself, with the help of a pharmacist. The preparation was called Botrin. The pharmacist was called Ricardo Uribe. At the time he worked in the capital. When the war was over he had had some trouble with the police. They found his name on the list of suppliers for the hospital of the Hyena. Then someone came forward and said he had been working there. But many also said that he was a good man. He presented himself to the investigators and explained everything, and when they let him go he took his things and went away to a small town buried in the countryside, in the south. He bought a pharmacy. He lived alone with a small daughter he called Dulce. He said the mother had died many years earlier. Thus he hid Nina, the surviving daughter of Manuel Roca.

The man looked around without seeing anything. He was in his thoughts. The savagery of children, he was thinking. We

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have turned over the earth so violently that we have reawakened the savagery of children.

He looked back at the woman.

"Is it true that they called you Tito?" she asked.

The man nodded yes.

"Had you ever met my father before?"

"I knew who he was."

"Is it true that you were the first to shoot him?"

The man shook his head. "What difference does it make . . ."

"You were twenty. You were the youngest. You had been fighting for only a year. El Gurre treated you like a son."

Then the woman asked if he remembered.

The man stared at her. And only in that instant, finally, did he see again, in her face, the face of that child, lying there, impeccable and right, perfect. He saw those eyes in these, and that extraordinary strength in the calm of this tired beauty. The child: she had turned and looked at him. The child: now she was there. How dizzying time can be. Where am I? the man wondered. Here or there? Have I ever been in a moment that was not this one?

The man said that he remembered. That he had done nothing else, for years.

"For years I asked myself what I ought to do. But the truth is that I never was able to tell anyone. I never told anyone that you were there that night. You may not believe me, but it's so. At first, obviously, I didn't say anything because I was afraid. But time passed, and it became something else. No one thought about the war anymore. People wanted to look ahead, they no longer cared about what had happened. I began to think that it was better to forget everything. Let it go. At a certain point, however, it emerged that Roca's daughter was alive, she was hidden in a village in the south. It was incredible that she had come out of that inferno alive, but with children you can never say. Finally someone saw the girl and swore that it was really her. And then I realized that I would never be free of that night. Neither I nor the others. I began to ask myself what she might have seen and heard. And if she could remember my face. Who knows what happens in the mind of a child. Adults have a memory, and a sense of justice, and often they have a taste for revenge. But a child? I convinced myself that nothing would happen. Then Salinas died. In that strange way."

The woman was listening, motionless.

He asked if she wanted him to go on.

"Go on," she said.

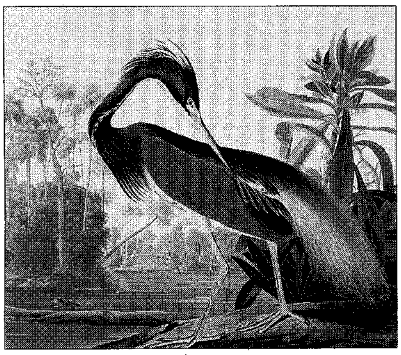
"It came out that Uribe had something to do with it. It may have been a coincidence, but certainly it was odd. Little by little everyone was persuaded that the child knew something. It's difficult to understand now, but those were strange times. The country was going forward, beyond the war, at an astonishing speed, forgetting everything. But there was a part of the country that had never got over the war, and was unable to fit in to the new happy world. I was one of those. We all were. For us nothing had ended. And that child was a danger. We talked about it a lot. So finally it was decided that somehow the child should be eliminated. I know it seems mad, but in reality it was very logical. They decided to eliminate her and charged the Count of Torrelavid to do it."

The man paused. He looked at his hands. It was as if he were putting his memories in order.

"He was a man who had been a double agent during the whole war. He worked for them, but he was one of us. He went to Uribe and asked him if he would rather spend his life in jail for the murder of Salinas or vanish into nothing and leave him the child. Uribe was a coward. He had only to stay quiet, and no court would have succeeded in convicting him. But he was afraid and he fled. He left the child to the Count and fled. He died ten years later, in some godforsaken village on the other side of the border. He left a note that he had done nothing and that God would follow his enemies to the gates of Hell."

The woman turned to look at a girl who was laughing loudly, leaning on the bar of the café. "Go on," she said.

"Everyone expected the Count to kill her. But he didn't. He kept her with him, at home. They made him understand that he was supposed to kill her. But he did nothing. Finally he said, 'Don't worry about the girl.' And he married her. For months people around there



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spoke of nothing else. But then they stopped thinking about it. The girl grew up and bore the Count three sons. No one ever saw her. They called her Doña Sol, because it was the name the Count had given her. One strange thing was said about her. That she didn't speak. From the time of Uribe, no one had ever heard her say a word. Perhaps it was an illness. Without knowing why, people were afraid of her."

It had grown late, and the waiter came and asked if they wanted to eat. In one corner of the café three men had begun to play music. It was dance music. The man said he wasn't hungry.

"I invite you," the woman said, smiling. She insisted. She said they might have a dessert. "Would you like a dessert?"

The man nodded yes.

"All right, then, a dessert. We'll have a dessert."

The waiter said it was a good idea. Then he added that they could stay as long as they wanted. He turned to the bar, and shouted the order to someone invisible.

"Did your friends tell you all those stories?" the woman asked.

"Yes."

"And you believe them?"

"Yes."

The woman asked him to tell her the rest.

"What's the point?"

"Do it, please."

"It's not my story, it's yours. You know it better than I do."

"Not necessarily."

The man shook his head. He looked again at his hands. "Many years had passed. I was able to sleep at night. People didn't call me Tito. I thought I had done it, the war was really over. There was only one thing left to do. I took the train and went to Belsito, to tell the Count the story of the trapdoor and the child. He knew who I was. He was very kind, he took me into the library, offered me something to drink, and asked me what I wanted. I said: 'Do you remember that night, at the farmhouse of Manuel Roca?' And he said: 'No.' 'The night when Manuel Roca . . . ' And he said, 'I don't know what you're talking about.' He said it with great tranquillity, even sweetness. He was sure of himself. He had no doubts. I understood. We spoke a little about work and even politics, then I got up and left. He had a young boy take me to the station. The boy couldn't have been fourteen, yet they let him drive the car."

"Carlos," said the woman.

"I don't remember his name."

"My oldest son. Carlos."

The man was about to say something, but the waiter had come with the desserts. He brought a bottle of wine. He said that if they wanted a taste it was a good wine to drink with the sweets. Then he said something witty about the owner. The woman smiled, but the man barely noticed, because he was following the train of his memories. When the waiter left, he began to speak again.

"Before leaving Belsito that day, as I was walking down the long hallway, with all those closed doors, I thought that somewhere, in the house, you were there. I would have liked to see you. I was thinking that, when an odd thing happened. A door opened. For a second I was absolutely certain that you would come out, and pass by, without saying a word." The man shook his head slightly. "But nothing happened."

The woman, with the spoon in her hand, was staring at the dessert sitting on the plate, as if she were trying to see how to unlock it.

Every so often someone brushed by the table and glanced at the two of them. They were a strange couple. They didn't have the gestures of people who knew each other. But they were speaking intimately. She looked as if she had dressed to please him. Neither of them wore a ring. You would have said they were lovers, but perhaps many years before. Or sister and brother, who could say?

"What else do you know about me?" the woman asked.

The man thought of asking her the same question. But he had begun to tell a story, and he realized that it pleased him to tell it—perhaps he had been waiting years for that moment, to tell it, once and for all, in the shadowy light of a café, with three musicians in a corner, playing the three-four rhythm of dance music they'd learned by heart.

"Some years later the Count died in a car accident. You were left with three children, Belsito, and everything else.

But the relatives didn't like it. They said you were mad and couldn't be left alone with the three boys. They brought the case to court and the judge concluded that they were right. So they took you away from Belsito and handed you over to the doctors, in a sanitarium in Santander. Is that right?"

"Go on."

"It seems that your sons testified against you."

The woman played with her spoon. She made it ring against the edge of the plate.

"A couple of years later you escaped, and disappeared. Someone said it was your friends who had helped you flee, and that now they kept you hidden somewhere. But those who had known you said, simply, that you had no friends. They looked for you for a while. Then no one spoke of it anymore. Many were convinced that you were dead. Plenty of crazy people disappear."

"Do you have children?" the woman asked.

"No."

"Why?"

The man answered that you needed to have faith in the world to have children.

"In those years I was still working in a factory," he said. "Up in the north. They told me that story about you, about the clinic and the fact that you had escaped. They said that the most likely thing was that you were at the bottom of a river, or at the foot of a cliff. They said it was all over. It struck me, that business about your being mad. I wondered what sort of madness it was: if you wandered around the house screaming, or if you were just silent, in a corner, counting the floorboards and holding a piece of string tight in your hand or the head of a robin. The idea one has of crazy people is ludicrous, if one doesn't know them." He paused. "Four years later el Gurre died." He was silent again, as if it had suddenly become tremendously difficult to go on. "He was found with a bullet in his back, face down in the manure, in front of his stable." He looked at the woman. "In his pocket they found a note. On the note was written the name of a woman. Yours." He made a light writing motion in the air. "Doña Sol." He let his hand fall back to the table. "It was his handwriting. He had written the name. Doña Sol."

The three musicians, at the back, struck up another waltz, dragging the tempo and playing very softly.

"From that day I expected you."

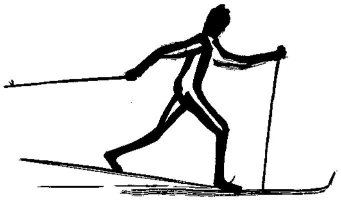
The woman had raised her head and was staring at him.

"I knew that nothing could stop you, and that one day you would come to me as well. I never thought that you would shoot me in the back or send someone to kill me. I knew that you would come and look me in the face. Because I was the one who had opened the trapdoor that night, and then had closed it. And you would not forget that."

The man hesitated, then said the only thing he still wanted to say.

"I have carried this secret inside me for my whole life, like a disease. I deserve to be sitting here, with you."

Then he was silent. His heart was beating rapidly, in his fingertips and in his temples. He thought how he was sitting in a café, across from an old woman who was mad and who, from one moment to the next, might get up and kill him, and he would do nothing to stop her. The war is over, he thought.



When the man stopped talking the woman stopped looking at him. The man had let himself fall back into the chair. Now he seemed smaller and tired. He observed, as if from a distance, the woman's eyes wander about the café and over the table: resting everywhere except on him. He realized that he still had his overcoat on, and so he sank his hands in the pockets. He felt the collar pulling at his neck, as if he had put two stones in his pockets. He thought of the people around, and found it funny how no one could have any idea of what was happening.

Then the woman began to speak.

"Uribe picked up the Count's cards and let them slide slowly between his fingers, revealing them one by one. I don't think he realized what he was los-

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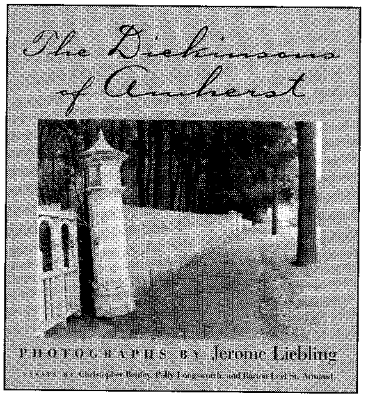
The Dickinsons of Amherst
PHOTOGRAPHS BY Jerome Liebling
ESSAYS BY Christopher Benfey, Polly Longsworth, and Barton Levi St. Armand

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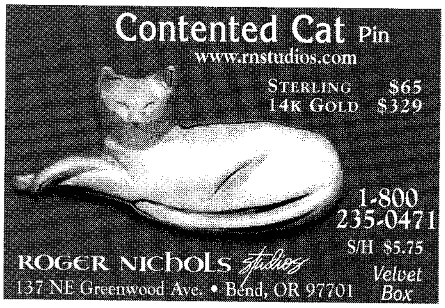
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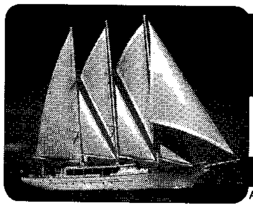
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ing. Certainly he realized what he was not winning. I didn't count much for him. He got up and said goodbye to the company, politely. No one laughed, no one dared say a word. They had never seen a poker hand like that. Now you tell me: why should this story be any less true than the one you told me? My father was a wonderful father. Don't you believe me? Why should this story be less true than yours?

"Do you know that I know everything about that night, and yet I remember almost nothing? I was there beneath the trapdoor, I couldn't see, I heard something, and what I heard was so absurd it was like a dream. It all vanished in that fire. Children have a special talent for forgetting. But then they told me, and so I knew everything. Did they lie to me? I don't know. You came into the house, you fired at my father, then Salinas shot him, and finally el Gurre stuck the barrel of the machine gun in his mouth and blew his head off. How do I know? El Gurre told me. He liked to talk about it. He was an animal. You were all animals. You men always are, in war. How will God forgive you?"

"Stop it."

"Look at yourself, you seem to be a normal man, you have your worn overcoat, and when you take off your glasses you put them carefully in their gray case. The windows of your kiosk are clean, when you cross the street you look carefully to the right and the left, you are a normal man. And yet you saw my brother die for no reason, only a child with a gun in his hand, a burst of gunfire and he was gone, and you were there, and you did nothing. You were twenty, holy God, you weren't a ruined old man, you were a boy of twenty and yet you did nothing. Please, explain all this to me. It's not the nightmare of a man with a fever, it's something that happened. Can you tell me how it's possible?"

"We were soldiers."

"What do you mean?"

"We were fighting a war."

"What war? The war was over."

"Not for us."

"Not for you?"

"You don't know anything."

"Then tell me what I don't know."

"We believed in a better world."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't turn back. When people begin to murder each other you can't go back. We didn't want to get to that point, others started it, but then there was nothing we could do."

"What do you mean, a better world?"

"A just world, where the weak don't have to suffer for the evil of the others, where everyone has a right to happiness."

"And you believed that?"

"Of course I believed it, we all believed it. It could be done and we knew how."

"You knew?"

"Does that seem so strange to you?"

"Yes."

"And yet we knew. And we fought for that, to be able to do what was right."

"Killing children?"

"Yes, if it was necessary."

"But what are you saying?"

"You can't understand."

"I can understand—you explain and I'll understand."

"You can't sow without plowing first. First you have to break up the earth. First there has to be a time of suffering, do you understand?"

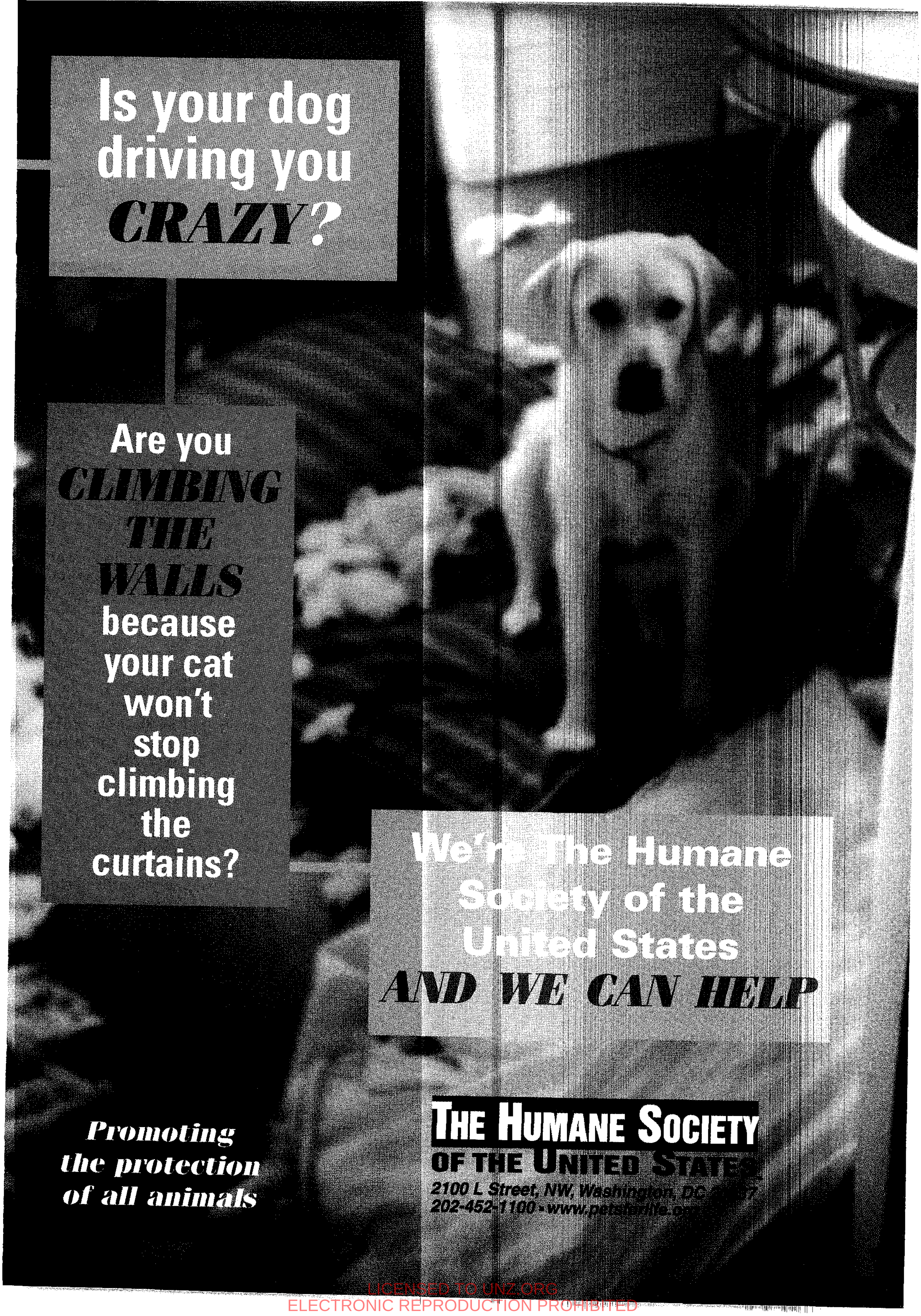
"No."

"There were a lot of things that we had to destroy in order to build what we wanted. There was no other way, we had to be able to suffer and to inflict suffering—whoever could endure more pain would win. You cannot dream of a better world and think that it will be delivered just because you ask for it. We had to fight, and, once you understood that, it no longer made any difference if they were old people or children, your friends or your enemies. And when everything became horrific we had our dream. We knew that however great the price the reward would be immense. We were not fighting for money, or a field to work, or a flag. We were doing it for a better world, do you understand what that means? We were restoring a decent life to millions of men, and the possibility of happiness, of living and dying with dignity, without being trampled or scorned. We were nothing, they were everything, millions of men—we were there for

BREAKFAST SONG

My love, my saving grace,
your eyes are awfully blue.
I kiss your funny face,
your coffee-flavored mouth.
Last night I slept with you.
Today I love you so
how can I bear to go
(as soon I must, I know)
to bed with ugly death
in that cold, filthy place,
to sleep there without you,
without the easy breath
and nightlong, limblong warmth
I've grown accustomed to?
—Nobody wants to die;
tell me it is a lie!
But no, I know it's true.
It's just the common case;
there's nothing one can do.
My love, my saving grace,
your eyes are awfully blue
early and instant blue.

—Elizabeth Bishop
(1973)



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them. What's a boy who dies against a wall, or ten boys, or a hundred?”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Of course I believe it.”

“After all these years you still believe it?”

“Why shouldn't I?”

“You won the war. Does this seem to you a better world?”

“I have never asked myself.”

“It's not true. You have asked yourself a thousand times, but you're afraid to answer. Just as you have asked yourself a thousand times what you were doing that evening at Mato Rujo, fighting when the war was over, killing a man in cold blood whom you had never even seen before, simply killing him, for the sole reason that by now you had begun to murder and were no longer capable of stopping. And in all these years you asked yourself a thousand times why you got involved in the war, and the whole time your better world is spinning around in your head so that you will not have to think of the day when they brought you the eyes of your father, or see again all the other murdered men who filled your mind, an intolerable memory, which was the reason you fought—to be revenged. You all killed for revenge. It's nothing to be ashamed of—it's the only drug for pain there is, the only way not to go mad, the drug that enables us to fight. But it didn't free you, it burned your entire life, it filled you with ghosts . . .”

“It's not true.”

“You no longer even remember what life is.”

“What do you know?”

“Yes, what can I know, I'm only a crazy old woman, right? I can't understand, I was a child then, what do I know about it? I'll tell you what I know. I was lying in a hole, underground, three men came, they took my father, then . . .”

“Stop it.”

“Don't you like this story?”

“I'm not sorry for anything—we had to fight and we did. We weren't sitting at home with the windows shut, waiting for it to pass. We came out of our holes and did what we had to do, that's the truth. You can say anything you want, but it's different. You weren't there, you were a child. It's not your fault, but you can't understand.”

“You explain, I'll understand.”

“I'm tired now.”

“We have as much time as we want. You talk, I'll listen.”

“Please, leave me alone.”

“Why?”

“Do what you have to do, but leave me in peace.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I'm not afraid.”

“Then what is it?”

“I'm tired.”

“Of what?”

“Please . . .”

The woman drew away from the table and leaned against the back of the chair. She glanced around, as if suddenly she had realized where she was. The man was kneading his fingers, one hand clasped in the other. At the back of the café, the three musicians played. Someone was dancing. For a while they stayed like that, in silence.

Then the woman said something about a celebration many years earlier, where there was a famous singer who had asked her to dance. He was old, she said in a low voice, but moved with astonishing lightness, and before the music ended he had explained to her how a woman's destiny is written in the way she dances. He told her that she danced as if dancing were a sin. The woman smiled and looked around again.

She said that when she had seen the trapdoor raised she had not been afraid. She had looked at the boy's face, and in some way she had liked what was happening. But when he lowered the door, then, yes, she became afraid—with the worst fear of her life. The darkness that returned, the baskets being dragged over her head again, the boy's footsteps growing distant. She had felt lost. And that terror had never left her. She was silent. Then she added that the mind of a child is strange. “At that moment, I wished for only one thing: that that boy would take me away with him.”

She went on talking, about children and about fear, but the man didn't hear her because he was trying to put together the words to say one thing that he would have liked to let the woman know, that while he was looking at her, that night, curled up in the hole, so orderly and clean, he had felt a kind of peace. That it was like looking at a landscape or staring into the eyes of an animal. He looked at the woman and saw her speak, but he didn't hear her because his thoughts had carried him away and he was too tired to resist. He remained there, leaning against the chair back, doing nothing, until he began to weep. He wasn't ashamed, he didn't hide his face behind his hands, he didn't even try to control his face,

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contorted in sadness, while the tears descended to his collar, sliding down his neck, which was white and badly shaved, like the neck of every old man in the world.

The woman stopped. She hadn't realized that he was crying, and now she didn't know what to do. She leaned across the table and murmured something, softly. Instinctively she glanced at the other tables, and she saw that two boys, sitting nearby, were looking at the man, and one of the two was smiling. She yelled something at the boy, and when he turned toward her she looked him in the eyes and said, loudly, "Fuck you."

She filled the man's glass with wine and pushed it toward him. She sat back again. The man continued to weep. Every so often she looked around angrily.

The man had pulled a big handkerchief out of his pocket and was drying his tears. "I'm sorry," he said.

They said nothing else. It seemed that they no longer had anything to understand, together. And yet at a certain point the woman leaned toward the man slightly and said: "I must ask you something a little stupid."

The man looked up.

The woman seemed very serious.

"Would you like to make love with me?"

The man stared at her, motionless, silent.

For a moment the woman thought that maybe she hadn't said anything, that she had only thought of saying those words without having said them. So she repeated them, slowly: "Would you like to make love with me?"

The man smiled. "I'm old," he said.

"So am I."

"I'm sorry, but we're old," the man said again.

Something else occurred to her. "I'm not mad," she said.

"It doesn't matter. Really. To me it doesn't matter. It's not that."

The woman thought for a moment. "Don't worry, we can go to a hotel, you can choose it," she said. "A hotel that no one knows."

Then the man seemed to understand something. "You want us to go to a hotel?" he asked.

"Yes. I would like that. Take me to a hotel."

He said slowly: "A hotel room."

The woman said he mustn't be afraid.

"I'm not afraid," he said.

The woman smiled because he was quiet and this seemed to her a way of saying yes.

She looked in her bag, then took out a small black purse and pushed it across the table, to the man.

"Pay with this. I don't like women who pay in a café, but I invited you. Take this. Then give it back to me when we're outside."

The man took the little purse.

He thought of an old man who was paying with a purse of black satin.

They crossed the city in a taxi that seemed new and still had plastic on the seats. The woman looked out the window the whole time. They were streets she had never seen.

They got out in front of a hotel called the California. The sign went vertically up the four floors of the building, in big red letters that lighted up one by one. When the word was complete it shone for a little while, then went out completely and began again. C. Ca. Cal. Cali. Calif. Califo. Califor. Californ. Californi. California. California. California. California. Darkness.

They stood there for a little while, one beside the other, looking at the hotel. Then the woman said, "Let's go," and moved toward the door. The man followed her.

The desk clerk glanced at their papers and asked if they wanted a double room. But without any inflection in his voice.

"Whatever there is," the woman answered.

They took a room that looked onto the street, on the third floor. The desk clerk apologized that there was no elevator and offered to carry up the suitcases.

"No suitcases. We lost them," the woman said.

They went into the room and neither of them made a move to turn on the light. The woman placed her bag on a chair and went to the window. She pushed aside the transparent curtains and looked down for a while, into the street. Occasional cars passed, unhurried. The man was standing in the middle of the room. He was wondering if he should sit on the bed, or maybe say something about the place—for example, that it wasn't so bad. The woman went over to the man, unbuttoned his overcoat, and slipping it off his shoulders let it fall to the floor. They were close. They looked into each other's eyes for the second time in their lives. Then he slowly leaned over her; he had decided to kiss her on the lips. She didn't move and in a low voice said, "Don't be silly." The man stopped, and he stood like that, leaning slightly forward, feeling in his heart that everything was ending. But the woman slowly raised her arms, and took a step forward and embraced him, first gently, then powerfully, until her head rested on his shoulder and her whole body was pressed against his. The man felt the body of the woman who was holding him, and her hands, light, in his hair. He closed his eyes. He took the woman in his arms. And with all his old man's strength he hugged her to him.

When she began to undress she said smiling: "Don't expect much."

When he was lying on her, he said smiling: "You are very beautiful."

From a room nearby came the sound of a radio, just perceptible. Lying on his back, in the big bed, completely naked, the man stared at the ceiling wondering if it was weariness that made his head spin, or the wine. Beside him the woman was still, her eyes closed, turned toward him, her head on the pillow. They held each other by the hand. The night outside was illegible, and the time was vanishing without measure. He thought that he should be grateful to the woman, because she had led him there by the hand, step by step, like a mother with a child. She had done it wisely, and without haste. Now what remained to be done would not be difficult.

He let go of her hand and rolled onto his side, giving her his back. It seemed that this was what she was expecting. A gesture that left her free to think, and gave her some solitude in which to decide her final move. Sleep was about to carry him off. It occurred to him that he didn't like being naked because they would find him like that and everyone would look at him. But he didn't dare tell the woman. So he turned his head toward her, not enough to see her, and said: "I'd like you to know that my name is Pedro Cantos."

The woman repeated it slowly. "Pedro Cantos."

Then he laid his head on the pillow again and closed his eyes.

Nina repeated the name in her mind.

She turned to look at her bag, sitting on a chair near the door. She thought of going to get it, but she didn't, and remained lying on the bed. She thought of the kiosk, of the waiter in the café, of the taxi with the plastic-covered seats. She saw again Pedro Cantos weeping, his hands sunk in the pockets of his overcoat. She saw him as he caressed her without the courage to breathe. I will never forget this day, she said to herself.

Then she turned, moved closer to Pedro Cantos, and did what she had been longing to do. She curled up behind him: she pulled her knees up to her chest; aligned her feet until she felt her legs perfectly paired, the thighs softly joined, the knees like two cups balanced one on the other, the calves separated by nothing; she shrugged her shoulders slightly and slid her hands between her legs. She looked at herself. She saw an old doll. She smiled. Shell and animal.

Then she thought that however incomprehensible life was, probably we move through it with the single desire to return to the hell that created us, to live beside whoever once saved us from it. She tried to ask herself where that absurd faithfulness to horror came from but she had no answer. She understood only that nothing is stronger than the instinct to return, to where they broke us, and to replicate that moment forever. Thinking that the one who saved us once can do it forever. In a long hell identical to the one from which we came. But suddenly merciful. And without blood.

The sign outside told its rosary of red lights. They were like the flames of a house on fire.

Nina rested her forehead against Pedro Cantos's back. She closed her eyes and slept. ♦

(Translated, from the Italian, by Ann Goldstein.)

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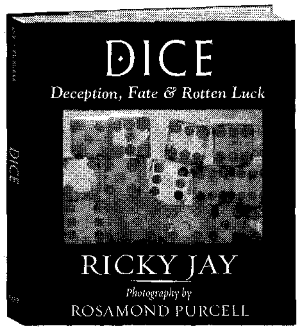

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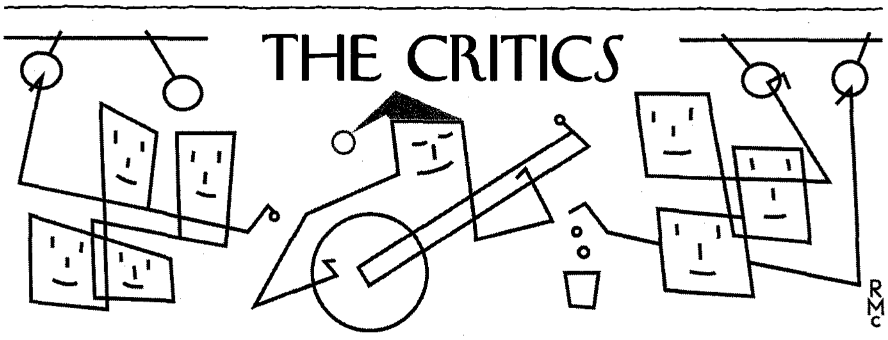


A CRITIC AT LARGE

CAT PEOPLE

What Dr. Seuss really taught us.

BY LOUIS MENAND

The Cat in the Hat was a Cold War invention. His value as an analyst of the psychology of his time, the late nineteen-fifties, is readily appreciated: transgression and hypocrisy are the principal themes of his little story. But he also stands in an intimate and paradoxical relation to national-security policy. He was both its creature and its nemesis—the unraveller of the very culture that produced him and that made him a star. This is less surprising than it may seem. He was, after all, a cat.

Every reader of "The Cat in the Hat" will feel that the story revolves around a piece of withheld information: what private demons or desires compelled this mother to leave two young children at home all day, with the front door unlocked, under the supervision of a fish? Terrible as the cat is, the woman is lucky that her children do not fall prey to some more insidious intruder. The mother's abandonment is the psychic wound for which the antics of the cat make so useless a palliative. The children hate the cat. They take no joy in his stupid pet tricks, and they resent his attempt to distract them from what they really want to be doing, which is staring out the window for a sign of their mother's return. Next to that consummation, a cake on a rake is a pretty feeble entertainment.

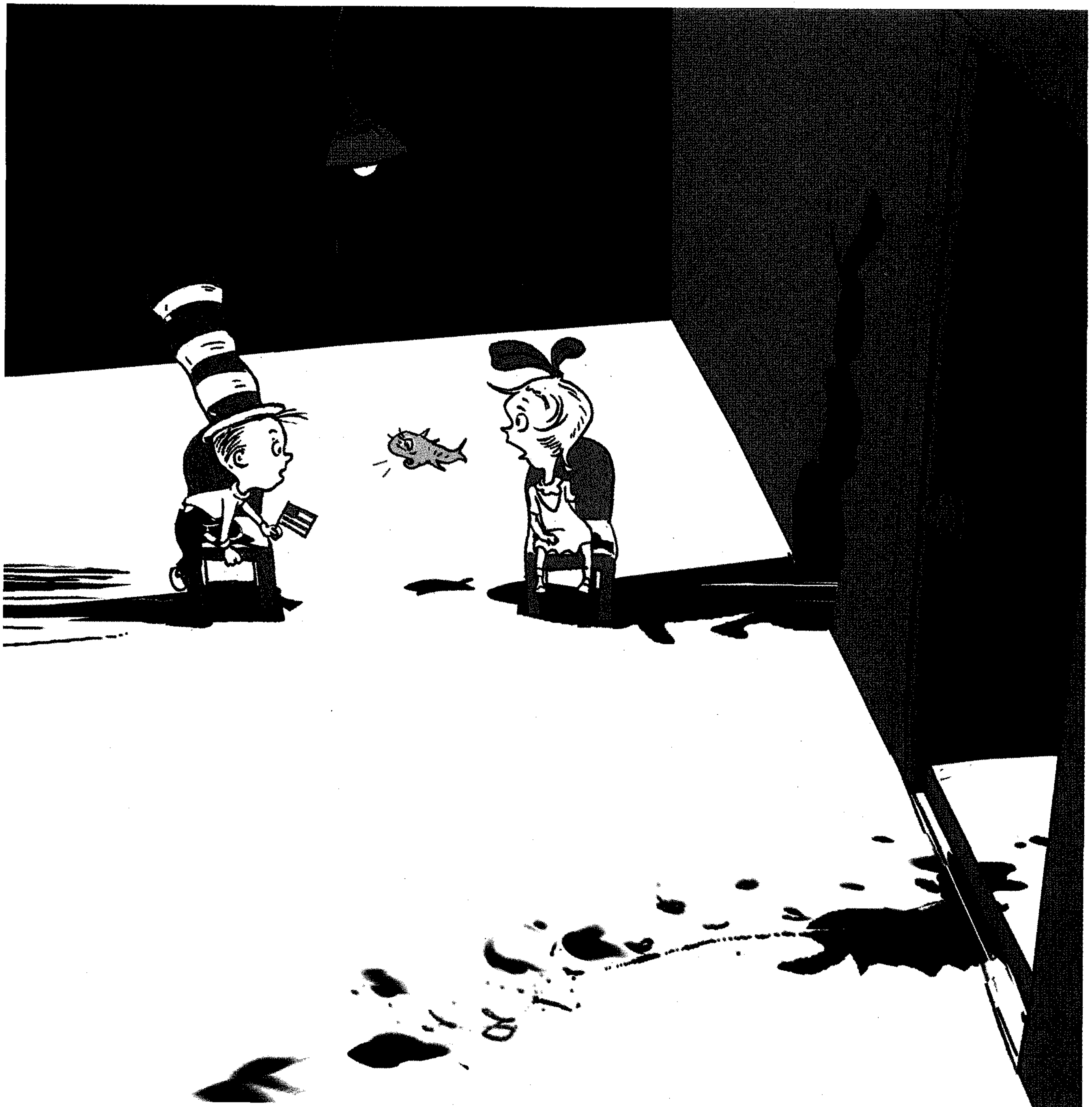
This is the fish's continually iterated point, and the fish is not wrong. The cat's pursuit of its peculiar idea of fun only cranks up the children's anxiety. It raises our anxiety level as well, since it keeps us from doing what *we* really want to be doing, which is accompanying the mother on her murderous or erotic errand. Possibly the mother has engaged the cat herself, in order to throw the burden of suspicion onto the children. "What did you do?" she asks them when she returns home, knowing that the children cannot put the same question to her without disclosing their own violation of domestic taboos. They are each other's alibi. When you cheat, you lie.

The decision to turn "The Cat in the Hat" on the trope of the *mater abscondita* is not without interest, coming, as it does, from a writer who chose his mother's maiden name as his pen name. Dr. Seuss was called Theodor Geisel, after his father, the son of a German immigrant who settled in Springfield, Massachusetts. Dr. Seuss's mother, also the daughter of German immigrants, was Henrietta Seuss, and when he appropriated the name for his books Dr. Seuss pronounced it in the German manner, "soice," until he realized that Americans naturally read the name as "soose," and that the American pronunciation of "Dr. Seuss" evoked a figure advantageous for an author of children's books to be associated with—Mother Goose. Henrietta Seuss was six feet tall and weighed nearly two hundred pounds. Dr. Seuss's authorized biographers, Judith and Neil Morgan, report that she was an accomplished high diver (not a sport one can easily picture a two-hundred-pound woman engaging in), and that she was admired for her beauty. She was a devoted reader of bedtime stories, and she encouraged her son's interest in rhythm and rhyme.

The single recreation of Dr. Seuss's father was target shooting, a hobby his son once called "silly and unproductive." In 1902, he held the world record for marksmanship at two hundred yards. He had the misfortune of inheriting the presidency of the family brewery a month before Prohibition was declared, but he was never poor. His son attended Dartmouth, then went to Oxford, but he dropped out after less than a year. His tutor told him that he was the only man he had ever met who should never have gone to Oxford. He then tried the Sorbonne. He left that institution after fifteen minutes. When he returned to the United States, in 1927, he began a successful career in advertising. He became famous for his work on behalf of an insecticide called Flit.

The breakthrough came in 1937, when an old Dartmouth friend, an editor at Vanguard Press, persuaded his boss to publish "And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street," a book that twenty-seven other publishing houses had turned down. This was followed by a steady stream of Dr. Seuss books, including the great political trilogy "The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins" (1938), "The King's Stilts" (1939), and "Bartholomew and the Oobleck" (1949), and two classic studies of identity, "Horton Hatches the Egg" (1940) and "Horton Hears a Who!" (1954). And so in 1954, when John Hersey published a piece in *Life* deploring the books used in public schools to teach children how to read—he called them "pallid primers [with] abnormally courteous, unnaturally clean boys and girls"—he mentioned Dr. Seuss as one of the "imaginative geniuses" whom publishers might turn to in the hope of enriching the books they produced for the schools. In 1955, one of those publishers took Hersey's advice.

This was William Spaulding, director of the education division at Houghton Mifflin. Spaulding had read Hersey's article. He had also read a best-seller called "Why Johnny Can't Read," which had come out that year. "Why Johnny Can't Read" was, similarly, an attack on primers, which it described as "hor-



Transgression and hypocrisy are themes at the heart of Dr. Seuss's best-selling children's classic, published in the midst of the Cold War.

ISTVAN BANYAI

rible, stupid, emasculated, pointless, tasteless little readers, the stuff and guff about Dick and Jane or Alice and Jerry visiting the farm and having birthday parties and seeing animals in the zoo and going through dozens and dozens of totally unexciting middle-class, middle-income, middle-I.Q. children's activities that offer opportunities for reading 'Look, look' or 'Yes, yes' or 'Come, come' or 'See the funny, funny animal.'"

The author was Rudolf Franz Flesch, an Austrian émigré with a Ph.D. from Teachers College. His point wasn't just that the Dick and Jane and Alice and Jerry readers were boring; his point was that they were based on a flawed pedagogy. This was the theory of word recognition—the idea that children learn words by memorizing them. Flesch argued that this was an absurd way to teach reading, since it left the child without resources when confronted with an unfamiliar word. The correct method, Flesch believed, was phonics, teaching children the sounds that letters and groups of letters make—he maintained that there are forty-four such sounds in English—so that they will be able to figure out unfamiliar words. Ultimately, of course, we do memorize words; we don't stop to sound them out. But Flesch thought that people could get to that stage a lot faster if they started with phonics.

Flesch claimed that American children advanced much more slowly in reading than European children did (this was in the days when Americans still cared what Europeans thought of them); and he suggested that the failure of the public schools was a threat to democracy and the American dream, since it deprived poor and middle-class children of the quality of education available to the affluent. Flesch also asserted that "first- and second-graders in our public schools are not taught to read at all, as shown by the fact that there isn't a single book on the market that they can manage to read by themselves," and this hint of an unexploited class of consumers is undoubtedly what inspired Spaulding to invite Theodor Geisel to dinner. "Write me a story that first-graders can't put down!" he told him.

There was an added requirement. In the back of "Why Johnny Can't Read," Flesch had printed seventy-two word lists, which parents who bought the book could use to teach their children at home. Spaulding asked Geisel to write a story that used only a limited number of similar words, words recognizable by a first grader. As Geisel later explained to an interviewer:

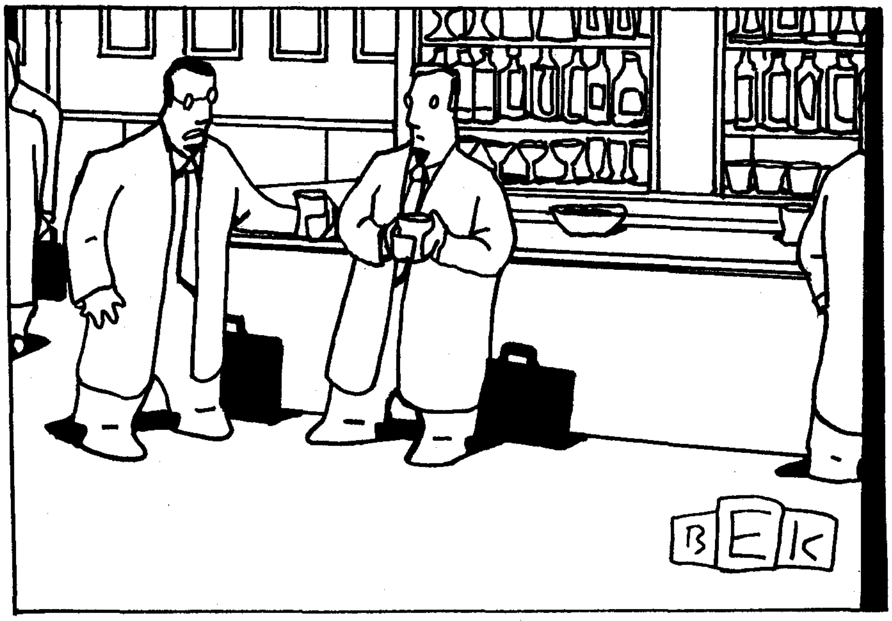
> He sent me a list of about three hundred words and told me to make a book out of them. At first I thought it was impossible and ridiculous, and I was about to get out of the whole thing; then decided to look at the list one more time and to use the first two words that rhymed as the title of the book—cat and hat were the ones my eyes lighted on. I worked on the book for nine months—throwing it across the room and letting it hang for a while—but I finally got it done.

This makes the project seem less scientific than it was. Spaulding published textbooks; he was not in the business of dreaming up brainteasers for Dr. Seuss. He really believed in Flesch's doctrine, and he wanted a book he could sell to the schools; he had already agreed to give Random House, Geisel's regular publisher, the rights to the trade edition. Spaulding handed Geisel three lists, drawn up by experts. The first was composed of two hundred and twenty words that first graders could be expected to recognize at sight—like "a," "about," "and," "are," and so on. Geisel selected a hundred and twenty-three. The second list contained two hundred and twenty words that beginning readers might recognize from phonics exercises—sets of words similar in sound, such as "make" and "rake" and "cake." Geisel chose forty-five. And the third list contained two hundred and twenty words that first graders had probably never seen but should be able to decipher, such as "beat," "fear," and "kick." Geisel used thirty-one. This netted him a hundred and ninety-nine words. It wasn't enough to make a story from, so he added twenty-one words of his own, including "nothing," "mess," and "pink." "The Cat in the Hat" is 1,702 words long, but it uses only two hundred and twenty different words. And (as the cat says) that is not all. Geisel put the whole thing into rhymed anapestic dimeter. It was a tour de force, and it killed Dick and Jane.

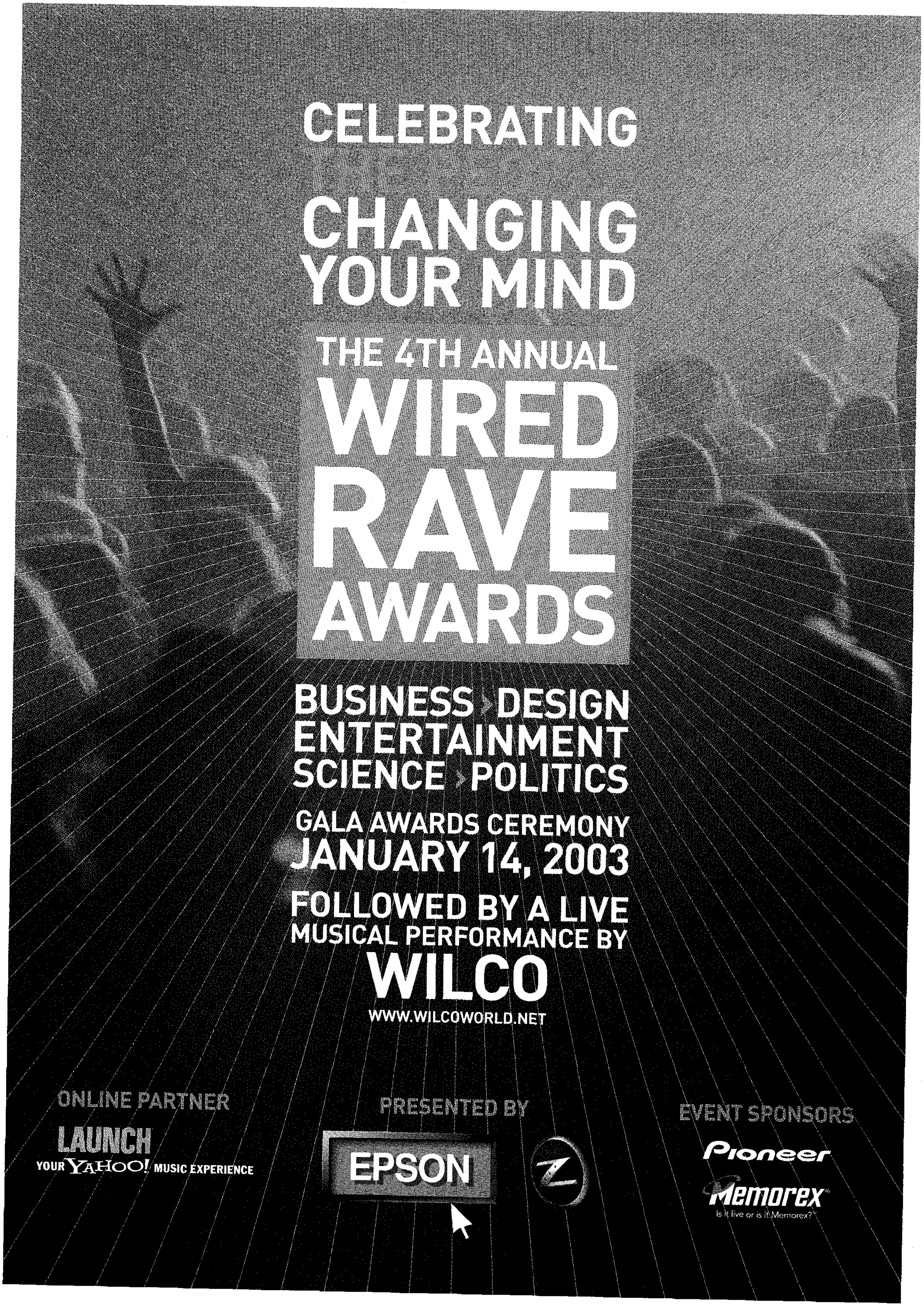
It had some help from the Cold War. The idea that young people were being exposed to a commercial culture that was making them vicious and stupid was a prevalent anxiety in the mid-fifties. The popularity of "Why Johnny Can't Read" was one symptom of that anxiety. Another was Frederic Wertham's "Seduction of the Innocent," an attack on the comic-book industry. Wertham was a psychiatrist who worked with problem children and delinquents. His book came out in 1954, the same year that a Senate subcommittee held widely publicized hearings on the effects of comic books on young readers, at which Wertham testified. *Mad* magazine, which was started in 1952 and specialized in gory humor, was a target of the investigation. And then there was television. In 1950, nine per cent of American homes had a television set; in 1956, the figure was seventy-two per cent. The general fear that American children were growing up in a dumbed-down culture was crystallized by the launching of Sputnik.

Sputnik went into orbit on October 4, 1957. It was the size of a beach ball, and its sole technical feature was the emission of a steady beeping sound. It was a danger to no man. But that wasn't the point. The point was the missile used to launch it. Nuclear devices are not much good unless you can deliver them, and the launching of an artificial satellite suggested that the Soviets, who had exploded their first thermonuclear bomb two years before, were on the way to developing an ICBM capability. A month later, on November 3rd, the Soviets put a second satellite into orbit. Sputnik 2 carried a very unhappy Russian dog, named Laika, which contributed a spooky, mad-scientist effect to the whole thing. There was panic in the United States.

The accepted diagnosis was that the United States was being beaten in the arms race by a nation with a superior educational system. Sputnik was believed to have exposed a technology gap. "Mortal Challenge," the cover of *Newsweek* declared. "A World at Stake—In Science, Education, Diplomacy, Economics, Defense." *The Saturday Review* pointed out that "without mathematics, democracy cannot hope to survive." The official response, besides an increase in funding for missile research, was the passage of the National Defense Education



"Where do you see yourself getting drunk in five years?"



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Act of 1958. In "the present emergency," the act explained, "the national interest requires . . . that the Federal Government give assistance to education for programs which are important to our defense." These were identified as science, mathematics, and modern foreign languages.

The National Defense Education Act of 1958 paid for loans to students; for equipment needed to teach science, math, and foreign languages; for "national defense" fellowships for graduate students; and for testing and guidance services. It established centers for the study of foreign languages and supported research on the use of the media for educational purposes. The fields targeted by the act were the ones that benefitted most, but every area in education benefitted to some degree, because resources put into one area from outside free up resources for others. The baby boom was already kicking in, and the National Defense Education Act of 1958 started a steady flow of funding for educational institutions. In the same period, the economists Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker were developing the concept of human capital, which figured an educated citizenry as an economic asset and, by inference, a national-security priority. Rudolf Flesch had prevailed.

"The Cat in the Hat" was published in March, 1957, seven months before Sputnik. Within weeks, it was selling at a rate of twelve thousand copies a month. Random House's publisher, Bennett Cerf, contrived to sell his trade edition to the schools through jobbers, and he ended up acquiring the textbook rights from Houghton Mifflin. And 1957 was the peak year of the baby boom. In 1945, the last year of the war, 2.9 million children were born in the United States. In 1952, 3.9 million were born: these are the children who were five years old when "The Cat in the Hat" came out. In 1957, 4.3 million children were born, still the largest cohort in American history. By 1960, "The Cat in the Hat" had sold a million copies. By 2000, it had sold 7.2 million hardcover copies in the United States alone, making it the ninth best-selling children's hardcover book of all time. It was translated into many languages, including Latin: "Cattus Petasatus."

The success of "The Cat in the Hat" persuaded Cerf to start a division at Random House called Beginner Books, and he put his wife, Phyllis, and Geisel in charge of it. They shamelessly appropriated poor, forgotten William Spaulding's model. Phyllis Cerf made a list of three hundred and seventy-nine words, taken from primers. Authors could choose two hundred words from this list, and could add twenty "emergency" words of their own. Beginner Books started with four titles in 1958. By 1960, it was bringing in a million dollars a year. Random House became the largest publisher of children's books in America; a third of its total sales volume was in juvenile books.

A hundred Beginner Books were eventually published. One was "Green Eggs and Ham," in 1960. Bennett Cerf had bet Geisel fifty dollars that he could not write a book using just fifty words. Geisel won the bet. Forty-nine of the words in "Green Eggs and Ham" are one-syllable words. (The fiftieth, of course, is "anywhere.") Cerf didn't come out too badly, though. "Green Eggs and Ham" was the most successful book Dr. Seuss ever wrote. It is the fourth best-selling children's hardcover title of all time. (The No. 1 best-seller is Janette Lowrey's 1942 blockbuster, "The Pokey Little Puppy.")

"The Cat in the Hat" transformed the nature of primary education and the nature of children's books. It not only stood for the idea that reading ought to be taught by phonics; it also stood for the idea that language skills—and many other subjects—ought to be taught through illustrated storybooks, rather than primers and textbooks. A few years after "The Cat in the Hat" came out, four-color reproduction became economically feasible. At the same time, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and its successors were pumping money into school libraries. There was an apparently insatiable market for children's books with educational potential, and this drew many writers and artists into the field. Children's lit was a Cold War growth industry, right alongside Boeing, Northrop, and Dow Chemical.

I am one of the 3.9 million Americans who were born in 1952, and "The Cat in the Hat" was the book with which I was taught, by my parents, to read. I remember distinctly the first word I read by myself. It was "and," a word William Spaulding's experts thought that a first grader should know by sight. I knew the phonetic value of each letter: "ah," "nn," "duh." What I could not figure out was how you got from those three discrete sounds to the sound-blur "and." I remember the moment the switch was flipped, and "a," "n," "d" turned into "and." I said to myself, "So that's how you do it." It is the moment you awake to the realization that there is a world available through print. A few years later, I was lying in my bed reading the third volume in the Hardy Boys' outstanding series, "The Secret of the Old Mill" (eighty-six on the big list), my heart pounding as Frank and Joe peeked through the floorboards of the old mill and watched the counterfeiters at work inches below them. Before the switch was flipped, the marks on the page had been opaque. Now they were affecting my heart rate. It is fun to have fun, but you have to know how.

The cat's improvisations with the *objets trouvés* in the home he has invaded are obviously an allegory for his creator's performance with the two hundred and twenty arbitrary words he has been assigned by his publisher. The cat is a *bricoleur*. He has no system—or, rather, his system is to have no system. He is compelled to make meaning from whatever is there. He fails, the *bricolage* topples, the fish ends up in a teapot; and this hint of semantic instability is expanded on in Dr. Seuss's most difficult work (No. 26 all-time), "The Cat in the Hat Comes Back," published in 1958.

"The Cat in the Hat Comes Back" is the "Grammatology" of Dr. Seuss. It is a book about language and structure, those Cold War obsessions. That the "Cat" books' appearance coincided with the publication of Noam Chomsky's "Syntactic Structures" (1957) and Claude Lévi-Strauss's "Structural Anthropology" (1958) is, as they used to say during the Cold War, no accident. Chomsky's work in linguistics, it might be noted, was supported in part by the U.S. Army Signal Corps, the Air Force's Office of Scientific Research and Air Research and Development Command, and the Office of Naval Research. Not all of the increase in military spending went into missile research.

Synopsis of "The Cat in the Hat Comes Back" is easy enough. Abandoned again by their feckless mother, those two sad sacks, Sally and me, are consigned to shovelling snow from a recent blizzard. The cat chooses the moment to make his return. Sally urges her brother to bar his entrance ("Don't you talk to that cat. / That cat is a bad one"). The cat brushes off the brushoff and enters the house, where he is discovered soon afterward in the tub, eating a cake. He is banished from the tub by the boy ("I have no time for tricks. / I must go back and dig"), but when the water is

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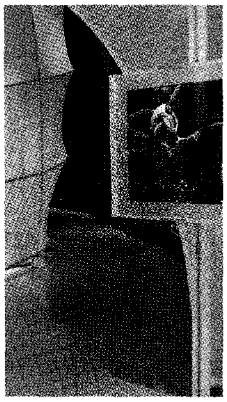

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drained a pink stain is left. The rest of the action concerns the problem of getting rid of the stain. It is first transferred, by the cat, to a series of household items, some plainly off limits to the children, including the mother's dress, the father's shoes, and the bed in what is described as "Dad's bedroom" (no doubt a response to the mother's extramarital adventures). Unable to erase the stain, the cat reveals, under his hat, various little cats named for the letters of the alphabet ("He helps me a lot. / This is Little Cat A").

These semiotic felines do exactly what a deconstructionist would predict: rather than containing the stain, they disseminate it. Everything turns pink. The chain of signification is interminable and, being interminable, indeterminate. The semantic hygiene fetishized by the children is rudely violated; the "system" they imagined is revealed to have no inside and no outside. It is revealed to be, in fact, just another *bricolage*. The only way to end the spreading stain of semiosis is to unleash what, since it cannot be named, must be termed "that which is not a sign." This is the Voom, the final agent in the cat's arsenal. The Voom eradicates the pink queerness of a textuality without boundaries; whiteness is back, though it is now the purity of absence—one wants to say (and, at this point, why not?) *of abstinence*. The association with nuclear holocaust and its sterilizing fallout, wiping the planet clean of pinkness and pinkos, is impossible to ignore. It is a strange story for teaching people how to read.

When you look through the secondary literature on "The Cat in the Hat," you read that children instinctively respond to the cat's sense of mischief. I wonder how many children really do react that way. My own identification, as a child, was entirely with the fish. I didn't admire his hysteria, of course (very uncool). But I understood what he was trying, with his limited vocabulary, to say, which is that "fun" is only a distraction from the reality of separation and abandonment. Pink snow, and those personified genitalia, Thing One and Thing Two, are no substitute for what we have lost. We don't want to be amused; we don't even want to amuse ourselves. We want to be taken care of.

Later on, in the nineteen-sixties, I, along with many other Americans born around 1952, began to understand the cat's appeal—in particular, the whole Thing One and Thing Two business. The fish, let's face it, was an uptight little dude, a tin-pot Puritan, and the domestic sphere in which he served as resident superego proved, on closer examination, to be a site of exclusion and oppression. New combinations seemed possible—seemed necessary. Maybe *bricolage* and *différance* were the way, after all. Misrule became the new rule, and the cat was its cockeyed lord. Having learned to read, we learned to misread. Phonics, which was supposed to make us into superscientists, cooking up formulas for landing those ICBMs right in Khrushchev's kitchen, had unleashed instead the spirit of "anything goes." It was *Pinkisme partout.*

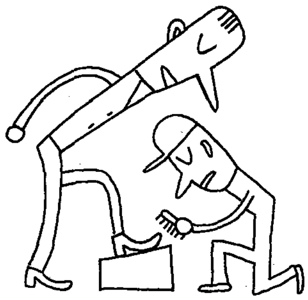
Dr. Seuss, too, flush with the wealth his contributions to the national security had brought him, fell prey to the countercultural forces that his own cat, one of the Cold War's most potent unguided missiles, had helped set in motion. In 1971, he published "The Lorax," a book about the environment that was much despised by the patriotic timber industry, and in 1984 he brought out "The Butter Battle Book," a work criticizing (of all things) the arms race. "The Butter Battle Book" was attacked in *The New Republic* for being soft on Communism. That's not the kind of thing people used to say about "The Pokey Little Puppy." Dr. Seuss took the same course as that other doctor who hitched a ride on the baby boom and the government gravy train it rode through school and into college: Dr. Spock. They went pink. (We won't get into the later career of Noam Chomsky.)

But that was then, a long time gone. Now we have something different: we have "anything goes" without the spirit. "Transgression," "subversion," "deconstruction" are praise words bestowed as solemnly as "structure" and "order" once were, little gold stars awarded to rappers and television comics. Cakes on rakes are everywhere. A million cats cavort frantically for our attention. Even the fish has been co-opted (though what choice did he have?). "Enjoy!" cries the fish. "Consume! Everything will be fine when your mother gets home." But the fish is whistling into the wind. The mother has left, and she's never coming back. It's just us and that goddam cat. ◆

BRIEFLY NOTED

The Story of Lucy Gault, *by William Trevor (Viking; $24.95).* "Captain Everard Gault wounded the boy in the right shoulder on the night of June the twenty-first, nineteen twenty-one." So opens Trevor's latest novel, with an act of political violence: the setting is rural Ireland, the Captain's wife is English, and three youths have come, under cover of darkness, to set fire to the family house. The wounding is, as it happens, an accident—the shot had been intended merely as a warning—but it quickly becomes clear to the Gaults that they must leave their beloved home. Eight-year-old Lucy, however, has other ideas, and her rebellion has devastating consequences. How should the loyalties to past and future, family and country, be measured? The tragedies that befall the Gaults are difficult to bear, because no one is clearly accountable. As the author delicately probes the nature of personal and political responsibility, the reader squirms with discomfort, longing for a scapegoat and yet aware of the implications of that longing.

The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Directors' Cut, *by Robert Coover (Grove; $24).* The dean of lickerish American metafiction ("Spanking the Maid," "John's Wife") returns with another salacious adventure, this one set within the confines of Cinecity, a metropolis devoted to representation-as-life. Through its streets strides Lucky Pierre, the hero of the novel and a veteran actor in porn movies. Coover's narrative is structured as an ever-repeating sine wave of carnal set pieces: arousal arrives, is dispatched through ejaculation, arrives again. Despite his surplus of pleasure, Lucky Pierre doesn't feel all that lucky, mainly because his life strikes him as scripted, devoid of spontaneity, and therefore unreal. Overwritten and overthought, Coover's novel has a subtle sadness in its heart, but the lower parts get top billing.



Poems of New York, *edited by Elizabeth Schmidt (Everyman's Library; $12.50).* In 1811, city planners unveiled the urban grid that would become the New York we know; not long afterward, the city's first poet, Walt Whitman, came along to chronicle its particular nexus of enthusiasm, expansiveness, and elegant ennui. This well-selected volume of New York poems, conceived in the days following September 11, 2001, includes not only the tried-and-true anthology pieces but an assortment of excellent lesser-known poems; we're reminded that in New York all things end "Too soon! Too soon!" (as Ferlinghetti exclaimed), although the city's sophisticated residents will murmur only "It gets so terribly late" (Elizabeth Bishop, teasing a friend). There are some stirring September 11th elegies here, but Whitman's words speak most consolingly, across the century, to the city's new sense of strength imperilled: "It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall, / The dark threw its patches down upon me also."

The Child That Books Built, *by Francis Spufford (Metropolitan; $23).* It is refreshing, when so many disquisitions on the pleasures of reading have a smug, cozy tone, to hear Spufford describe himself as an "addict" and wonder why reading is more socially sanctioned than video games. This is followed by an account of his childhood reading, from "The Hobbit," at age six, to Ursula K. Le Guin and beyond. Spufford intersperses his survey with excursions on what psychologists and cognitive scientists have managed to deduce about the way children think, and these insights in turn inform his own memories. Spufford believes he became a book addict because of the severe illness of his younger sister. Readers might have liked to hear more about this; that we don't is the natural corollary of his desire to lose himself in books and become "just a story among stories."

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THE ART WORLD

THE WALKER

Rediscovering New York with David Hammons.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

At a Starbucks in Cooper Square one recent evening, I waited in vain to meet David Hammons, the charismatic, elusive African-American artist whose much anticipated current solo show, at the Ace Gallery, is his first in New York in ten years. As the minutes went by and Hammons failed to appear (it turned out that he was waiting for me at another Starbucks, across the square), I weighed the odds that I was being treated to a custom-designed artwork. Hammons's strangely moving new installation, entitled "Concerto in Black and Blue," consists entirely of pitch-dark rooms that visitors are invited to explore with tiny flashlights in the company of other visitors whose presence is registered only by whisperings, footsteps, and firefly points of blue light. What, I thought, could be a more apt complement to an exhibition of nothing than a non-rendezvous with the artist himself?

Hammons, who is fifty-nine years old, has long flouted an art world eager to make him a star. Museums and collectors prize such racially charged objects as stones crowned with hair, which the artist gathers from black barbershops, and drawings made by repeatedly bouncing a soiled basketball on ten-foot sheets of paper. He sells these works privately, often in Europe. His installations and performances tend to be ephemeral in the extreme. Perhaps his most famous work survives only in a droll photograph of the artist standing on a winter street in 1983, peddling snowballs. "I decided a long time ago that the less I do the more of an artist I am," Hammons had said to me on the phone. "Most of the time, I hang out on the street. I walk." He agreed to let me walk with him.

When I got tired of waiting for Hammons, I took the walk myself, through the East and West Villages. I looked at things in what I fancied was a Hammonsy way: with an eye for the odd human touch. Hammons is a connoisseur of the frowsy and the ad hoc. He once told an interviewer, "I really love to watch the way black people make things . . . just the way we use carpentry. Nothing fits, but everything works. . . . Everything is a thirty-second of an inch off." For him, that spirit is both an aesthetic and an ethic. Back home, I got a perplexed call from the artist, who, after waiting for me, had set out on his own.

The following evening, Hammons and I met at the St. Mark's Bookshop, of which there is only one. A pleasantly gaunt, soft-spoken, watchful man, he wore a voluminous overcoat and a colorful knit cap. He shrugged off a crack I made about the proliferation of Starbucks. He reveres Starbucks, he let me know, for having made café culture universal and, not least, for providing toilets to walkers in the city. He takes walking seriously. In his company, I felt introduced to the East Village, which has been my neighborhood since 1973. Street people—or were they just people on the streets?—greeted him warmly, like constituents of a popular politician. He responded with courtly deference, giving them his full attention.

During our stroll, Hammons paused to behold casual marvels: a peculiar arrangement of potted plants braving the chill air outside a Japanese barbershop—"I always check out this place," he said—or a swath of gleaming aluminum foil under an unused door of a restaurant, held down by bricks to block drafts. In Tompkins Square Park, we passed a woman walking a dog that wore a floppy plastic supermarket bag on an apparently injured leg. "Something like that is worth a whole night out," Hammons said, gazing after the gimpy animal.

Hammons was born and grew up in Springfield, Illinois, the youngest of ten children of a single mother who worked menial jobs. "I still don't know how we got by," he said. A poor student, he was shunted to vocational courses. He found drawing and other art activities so easy that he had disdain for them. In 1962, he moved to Los Angeles, where, after a halfhearted foray into commercial art, he attended the Chouinard Art Institute (later CalArts). He became excited by the antagonistic avant-gardism of L.A.-based international artists such as Bruce Nauman and Chris Burden. He joined a scene that was both laid-back and irascible. "If you showed more often than every three years, no one took you seriously," he said. "Some people worked and worked and never showed at all. That's what I come from." He is friends with many jazz musicians, whose scorn of commercial success he described with relish.

Hammons's brand of Dada isn't substantially original. Yves Klein exhibited a vacant gallery, entitled "The Void," in 1958. Innumerable artists have exploited the poignance of shabby materials. Hammons freely admits to having been influenced by Arte Povera. (He told me that he was thrilled when that movement's master, Jannis Kounellis, agreed to a dual show with him in Rome in 1993.) But nothing in contemporary art matches his poetic compound of modesty, truculence, and wit. His radical independence stands out, to say the least, in today's scrabbling art world. It also distinguishes him from the itinerant artist-shamans who pop up regularly at international festivals. He regards that circuit as a trap. "The way I see it," he said, "the Whitney Biennial and Documenta need me, but I don't need them."

At one point during our meanderings, Hammons went into a bodega on First Avenue and bought a box of rice. A few minutes later, as we were passing a church, he said, "Watch this," and tossed a few handfuls of grain on the steps. I said, "Who's getting married?" He said, "The wedding was earlier. We missed it." At the time, I found the stunt hokey, but now I can't shake a vision of that forlorn bit of evidence of a wedding that never took place. Hammons married young, and he has two adult children. Divorced in the early seventies, he has never remarried. "As an artist, you have to keep reinventing yourself," he said. "In a marriage, you have to be consistent. It's difficult."

Hammons mentioned having once heard a tape of a rehearsal at which the late mystical jazzman Sun Ra instructed his musicians to play a standard—that is, an artifact of white culture—"incorrectly." Ra explained, "They don't need you to play their music correctly. If you do, they have you." Hammons commented, "That got to me. You know, you can play every note sharp or flat and still carry the tune." For him, violating norms and expectations seems to be a craft that demands painstaking attention to detail.

I didn't ask him what it's like being black in a profession that remains overwhelmingly white. But he volunteered, "It's like being a white man in the jazz world, like Chet Baker or Gerry Mulligan. They had confidence. I feed off the confidence of jazz greats like them." He disparaged the academic ironies of youn-

With "Concerto in Black and Blue," Hammons (above) celebrates the beauty of nothingness. Photograph by Katharina Bosse.

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ger artists, including blacks, who pose as subversives. He said, "I'm the C.E.O. of the D.O.C.—the Duchamp Outpatient Clinic. We have a vaccine for that smartness virus that's been in the art world for the last fifty years." The cure may be expressive activity that is streetwise, heartfelt, and utterly matter-of-fact.

We stopped for dinner at a Japanese restaurant on Avenue A. Under his overcoat, Hammons wore a lavender leather sports coat and an orange pullover shirt. He told me that he had recently done a work in the Japanese city of Yamaguchi: a huge boulder set in a miniature landscape on a flatbed truck, which travelled from neighborhood to neighborhood.

Hammons's experience in Japan helped inspire his latest installation, "Concerto in Black and Blue." A visit to the Zen gardens in Kyoto made him realize, he said, that "there are so many kinds of nothingness." Ace, an immense gallery on Hudson Street near the Holland Tunnel, is run by Doug Chrismas, a maverick dealer whose career has been almost as unpredictable as the artist's. "Doug was after me for six years to show with him," Hammons said. "I had to wait until I analyzed the space. If you try to dominate it, it will make a fool of you every time." He said that he dislikes the sterility of most New York galleries and museums, preferring European institutions, which are steeped in history. "The only place I really would like to show at in New York is the Metropolitan," he said. "It's full of spirit."

The nothingness of "Concerto" is beautifully measured, as if a mountain of darkness had been carved to fit snugly into the gallery's echoey rooms. As I wielded my dim cone of soft blue light, I felt curious about the identities of my invisible fellow-explorers but somehow forbidden to approach them. If the experience was profoundly disorienting, it was also endearingly funny in the frugality of its making—a tactic that is crucial for the artist. Hammons told me that he was aggrieved that many people had been stealing the flashlights, which, he said, cost just seventy cents apiece. He added that the installation, whose only materials are the flashlights, can be bought for a lofty price that varies according to how much space the buyer wants to darken. Our laughter, he didn't need to point out, is free. ♦

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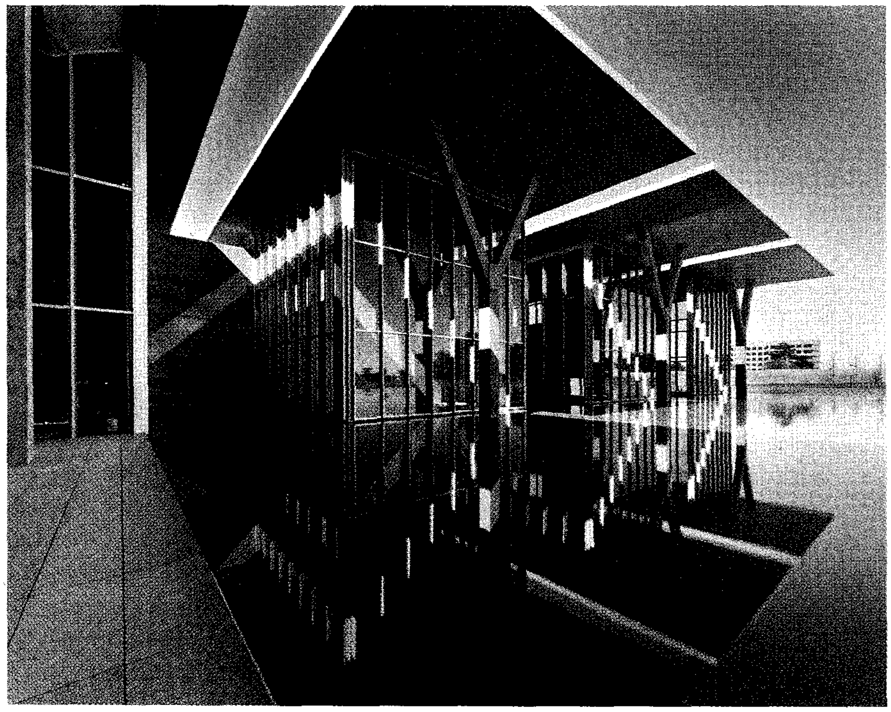
THE SKY LINE

A DELICATE BALANCE

Tadao Ando, a refined craftsman, builds big in Texas.

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

The Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth is an architectural masterpiece. It was completed in 1972, just two years before its designer, Louis Kahn, died, and it has become probably the most revered museum design of the second half of the twentieth century. The Kimbell isn't very large, but a move to expand it a few years ago was beaten back by those who believe that Kahn's composition of travertine walls and concrete vaults washed by natural light is so close to perfect that it should be left alone.



Gallery pavilions jut over the lagoon at Ando's Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

ROBERT POLIDORI

In 1996, the trustees of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth acquired an eleven-acre site across the street from the Kimbell and commissioned the Japanese architect Tadao Ando to design a new building for them. This was a little like asking someone to put up a church next door to Chartres. The commission seemed even more daunting because Ando, who is sixty-one years old, had never taken on a major public building in the United States, although he had designed a small private museum for the Pulitzer Foundation in St. Louis, which was completed last year, and a house in Chicago. Ando's work is refined and restrained. It has an austere delicacy that seemed unsuited to a large-scale project.

In fact, Ando has much in common with Louis Kahn. Both are masters of concrete and know how to coax a sense of spirituality out of harsh materials. They have both made something of a fetish of natural light, and both have an almost visceral repugnance toward frivolity and commercialism. Ando's new building opened this month. It is taller and wider than the Kimbell, but its expansiveness is not the reason it has become the dominant presence in the Fort Worth Cultural District, which also includes the Amon Carter Museum, by Philip Johnson, and the Will Rogers Memorial Center, a sprawling, vaguely Art Deco auditorium. The Kimbell is the work of a brilliant, highly self-

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conscious master. It is small and dense, and you sense Kahn's anguish in the building. Ando's swaggering new Modern, on the other hand, has a kind of easy poise.

For much of his career, Ando, who was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 1995, has synthesized Western modern architecture with a Japanese sensibility, and he has taken the synthesis to a new level here. The traditional Japanese controlled landscape with a courtyard garden has been blown up to Texas scale. Ando's Modern is shaped roughly like a fat, bulky L, and it faces two streets, from both of which it looks like a sprawling box sheathed in aluminum panels with vertical fins, set underneath a flat, overhanging roof. A parking lot separates the building from the streets—perhaps a reticent number of parking spaces by Texas standards, but still too much for the building. A tall, curving sculpture by Richard Serra stands at the corner of the lot. You could easily mistake the place for some corporation's headquarters.

But then you enter the building and all is forgiven. Actually, you don't even have to go in. As you approach the main entrance, where the aluminum gives way to glass, you can see a huge, two-story lobby crossed by a concrete bridge, with an acre and a half of lagoon on the other side. The landscape around the lagoon is a rolling lawn punctuated by trees. Three rectangular glass pavilions appear to float on the lagoon, as does an oval-shaped glass café. Unlike Kahn, who made a quiet exterior to house a jewel-box interior, Ando has used a quiet exterior to mask what is really another set of exteriors, turned away from the street. It's an extraordinary space, at once tranquil and exhilarating.

Of course, Fort Worth is not Kyoto, and there are problems. For instance, a yellow-and-blue billboard promoting a local personal-injury lawyer glares over a wall separating Ando's meticulously crafted landscape from the street. ("Well, that's probably a pretty lucrative billboard," a museum spokesperson said to me when I asked about it.) Then again, the Japanese have always been skillful at tuning out the garishness of contemporary life. Ando's response to Fort Worth sprawl is neither to embrace it nor to try to destroy it but simply not to see it when it interrupts his line of vision. The Japanese have also traditionally made much of what they call "borrowed scenery," or attractive distant vistas, and the Modern has plenty of borrowed scenery as well. Some of it is along the lines of the billboard, but since the cultural district that contains the Kimbell and the Modern is on a slight rise about a mile from downtown Fort Worth, there are enticing views of the skyline.

Many of Ando's early sketches for the Modern, which are now on display in the lobby, show his building in relation to Kahn's, but Ando is too strong an architect to pay homage by copying, and there are only two places in the new building where you sense that he is evoking Kahn. One is a vaulted ceiling that loosely echoes the shape of the Kimbell ceilings, and the other is a rounded concrete wall (actually the end of an elliptical gallery) that looks very much like a concrete stairwell in one of Kahn's other celebrated buildings, the Yale Center for British Art.

Not the least of the virtues of Ando's building is how well organized it is. You walk into the large, formal lobby, and the entire layout is apparent: museum shop to the left; auditorium to the right; lagoon straight ahead, with the café visible at the right side of the water and the pavilions jutting out to the left. The pavilions, which contain elegantly proportioned glass-enclosed galleries, are covered with concrete roofs that extend over the water on three sides and are supported by unusual, Y-shaped concrete pillars. The pillars could be considered abstract trees, or human figures with raised arms, but I doubt that is what the architect had in mind. I suspect that he was just making sure that the vista across the water was not static. He need not have worried. The water ripples in the wind, and the light changes it, so that one moment it is reflecting the architecture and the next distorting it. This is hardly the first building to be set against a reflecting pool—Ando uses the trick all the time, and so have plenty of Western architects—but it feels new here. Ando is brilliant at inventing ways to make you experience the connection between the building and the water not just from the outside but also from within. For example, at one end of the main galleries there is what appears to be a corridor leading to a stair, but as you move along the solid wall it becomes glass and you discover that you are gently descending

POETRY SEARCHES FOR RADIANCE

Poetry searches for radiance,
poetry is the kingly road
that leads us farthest.
We seek radiance in a gray hour,
at noon or in the chimneys of the dawn,
even on a bus, in November,
while an old priest nods beside us.

The waiter in a Chinese restaurant bursts into tears
and no one can think why.
Who knows, this may also be a quest,
like that moment at the seashore
when a predatory ship appeared on the horizon
and stopped short, held still for a long while.
And also moments of deep joy

and countless moments of anxiety.
Let me see, I ask.
Let me persist, I say.
A cold rain falls at night.
In the streets and avenues of my city
quiet darkness is hard at work.
Poetry searches for radiance.

—*Adam Zagajewski*

(*Translated, from the Polish, by Clare Cavanagh.*)

toward the water, almost being set into it.

Ando's galleries are not tucked into leftover space, as they are in so many museums of the previous generation. They are gracious, clear, generous, and varied. A few of them are two stories high, but they never feel overwhelming, and there are enough intimate areas for exhibiting smaller pieces. Most of the galleries on the second floor are lit by natural light. There is fifty-three thousand square feet of gallery space spread over the main body of the building and the pavilions, making this one of the largest museums of modern art in the country.

Michael Auping, the museum's chief curator, installed its admirable collection with great sensitivity to Ando's architecture. Putting Anselm Kiefer's vast lead-tin-and-steel sculpture "Book with Wings" all by itself in a small, concrete-walled, elliptical gallery and Andy Warhol's chilling green-and-black "Self Portrait" of 1986 at the top of the main staircase is the kind of thing that can be done only by a strong-willed curator who feels confident about working with a strong-willed architect. Ando has described the galleries as "concrete volumes encased in a glass-skin box," and Auping's brilliant eye for hanging art in them is particularly evident in the three pavilions over the lagoon. The concrete walls don't come right up to the glass. Room was left for a walkway between the concrete and the glass, and when you are strolling along you can't decide whether you are in a cathedral ambulatory or on a pier. There is a single piece of art at the end of each pavilion: a thin sculpture by Cy Twombly in one, a set of steel panels by Carl Andre in another, and a Michelangelo Pistoletto sculpture of an Etruscan figure against a mirror in the third. One piece holds the center of its space, another anchors the floor, and the other engages the wall. All three occupy less of the gallery than you might expect them to, and each comes as a surprise.

Many museums these days look their best before any art is installed in them. This is the first great museum building in a generation that gets even better when art is added. ♦

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THE THEATRE

KILLING FOR COMPANY

"Medea," "Imaginary Friends," "Adult Entertainment."

BY JOHN LAHR

Reader, have you been betrayed in love? Injustice poisons the soul and, worse, the memory of love. The betrayer lives and owns a future; you, the forgotten, die the slow death of abandonment and humiliation, with just the inheritance of empty days. Out of powerlessness, you dream murderous thoughts. You have been demeaned and discarded; you want to plant pain in the other's heart, and watch it grow. Razor blades in the bed? A dousing with hot oil? Headlights punched out? Clothes cut to shreds? Children abducted? These are not tabloid sidebars but actual matrimonial paybacks that I've witnessed among the comparatively reserved and well-educated burghers of my acquaintance over the years. Modern civilization has of necessity learned to contain revenge in ritualized battles—fighting with property (the divorce court, alimony, visitation rights) and fighting with prose (the roman à clef, the leaked embarrassment). But to the Athenians civilization was built on the pillars of self-control and moderation; the state constantly needed to warn its hot-blooded citizens about excessive, irrational passion that threatened the stability of the body politic. Euripides' "Medea," his earliest extant tragedy, is such a cautionary tale. In Fiona Shaw's daring modern interpretation (at the Brooks Atkinson), well directed by Deborah Warner, with a smart adaptation by Kenneth McLeish and Frederic Raphael, revenge is dissected with thrilling astuteness. Fuelled by envy's scorched-earth policy, which spoils all goodness, the barbarous and demented magic of revenge comes roaring back before our sometimes averted eyes.

The scene of mayhem, which foreshadows the primal, infantile fury to come, is a white paddling pool whose soothing ripples are reflected through a patio's Plexiglas partition onto the ancient gray brick wall of Jason's house. The patio is still under construction; children's toys are strewn around the cinder blocks and the slabs of covered wood. In the foreground, on the first step that leads up to the pool, is a child's green Red Cross kit—a mordant joke about Medea's wound, which bandages won't be sufficient to stanch. Euripides establishes Medea as a victim, more sinned against—at first, anyway—than sinning. Her beloved husband, Jason—for whom she has murdered her brother, betrayed her father, gone into exile in Corinth, and borne two sons—is taking King Kreon's daughter as his new wife. Medea's repayment for loyalty is to be disowned, then banished. Even before she enters, then, Medea has been physically and psychologically wiped out. All her bearings have been taken away—no husband, no home, no country, no hope. The din of her unruly rage precedes her. The clamor she makes is beyond tantrum and approaching demolition derby in its dangerousness, which is why Kreon must banish her. "Frankly, you frighten me," he tells her, when they meet, and adds, "I act in self-defense." But in this production, in its only false step, Medea's caterwauling doesn't seem to frighten her children, who run toward the approaching menace shouting, "Mommy!"

When Medea finally enters, she appears in sunglasses, a cardigan sweater, and a tidy summer dress, the picture of almost demure self- control. "My lovely life is lost; I want to die," she says in her first speech to the somewhat inaudible chorus. "He was everything to me—and now / He's the vilest man alive, my husband." Fiona Shaw is no scene-chewing, posturing blowhard. She has a lithe, muscular body and a sinuous mind to

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD AVEDON

Fiona Shaw's daring interpretation of "Medea" astutely dissects revenge.

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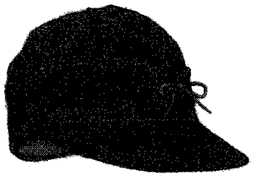

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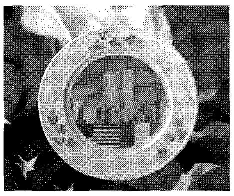

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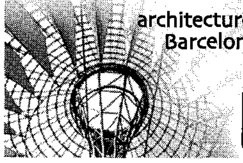

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Why would anyone spend the summer of 1963 in a Boston genetics lab?

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match. Nothing she does onstage is generalized. Every line is parsed with clarity of feeling. Her specialty is nervy women pushed to the end of their tether, their minds and hearts racing in adrenaline-pumping panic. Here she begins by dissembling rationality and builds gradually until she hits the top registers of rancor—insult, hate, fury—where she can be genuinely scary. After Kreon has sealed her fate and given her one day to leave his land—enough time to work her revenge—she is almost giddy with grief as she begins picking up her children's things. The prospect of murder seems to release her from meaninglessness and pain. When she announces her lethal plan—"So many roads lead fast / To death"—she starts fooling with a plastic toy gun, firing it every which way: over her shoulder, under her legs, at her head. She is deracinated.

Medea's Jason (the well-named and persuasive Jonathan Cake) is an oily hunk whose breathtaking insensitivity is as obvious as his strong chin. He condescends to her ("lost temper ruins everything"); he postures as sweet reason itself ("Hate if you must / I care no less for you because of it"); he flimflams her ("You don't need more children. I do. / They'll help the ones we had"). In the eternal trope of the jilted, Medea spells out how she made him, how she saved his life. But Jason impugns even her passion. "It was Aphrodite's weapon, passion, / That made you save my skin," he says. Nothing Medea says gets inside Jason or claims him. "How else will Jason learn?" she asks. Carnage gets his attention. By eliminating all that Jason holds dear—his bride-to-be, his king, his sons—Medea makes him feel and acknowledge both her presence and her passion. As she tells the abusive, grieving Jason, with her dead babies at her feet, "Name me your names, / I have your heart!"

After the bloodbath, Warner's production proves its brilliance in one final extraordinary image. Medea stands in the paddling pool, looking over at her prostrate husband, to whom she's refused any last contact with their dead children. "You spurned them—and now / You want their kisses?" But in the entropy of devastation, as the lights fade, she kicks water flirtatiously in Jason's direction. The image of seductive playfulness suggests that behind revenge is nostalgia; murder is shown as an absurd gesture, an attempt to force life symbolically back to a time before love went awry, a magical reassertion of the ideal that has been forever lost. In Medea's case, it's a time before exile, children, and disenchantment, a time when what mattered was the all-consuming connection between lovers.

Lillian Hellman may not have been a murderer, but she had an appetite for blood. Her $2.25-million libel suit against Mary McCarthy, who demeaned the quality and veracity of Hellman's writing on the Dick Cavett show, in 1979—"Every word she writes is a lie, including 'and' and 'the,' " McCarthy told Cavett—was meant to bankrupt McCarthy and warn off any whippersnapper with the temerity to challenge her version of events. "God forgives those who invent what they need," someone says in "The Little Foxes"—an epigram that proved untrue in Hellman's case. The suit, which exposed Hellman as a shameless fabulist, robbed her of almost all literary credibility and tarnished the memory of a substantial theatrical career. "Imaginary Friends" (at the Ethel Barrymore) is Nora Ephron's gleeful attempt to turn a literary circus into an intellectual vaudeville. The two divas—expertly played by Cherry Jones, as an eerie McCarthy look-alike, and Swoosie Kurtz, as the forked-tongued Hellman—bitch each other in Hell, glib patter merchants who seem instinctively to know that when skating on thin ice one's safety is in speed.

Ephron calls her evening "a play with music"; but, since "Imaginary Friends" doesn't aspire to penetrate character or to show complexity—the actual story is far uglier, the range of Hellman's bad behavior far worse than anything discussed onstage—"play" is really an honorary term. The music, by Marvin Hamlisch, features some clever lyrics by Craig Carnelia, which neither advance the notional plot nor illuminate the emotional or literary issues, like the gnarly question of what is properly "fact" and what is properly "fiction." In a tap-dance routine, Fact sings to Fiction:

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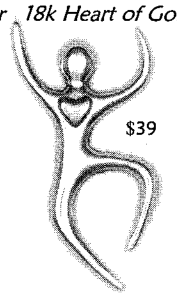

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"Please, I beg ya, don't provoke 'im / All you'll ever get is hokum." Indeed. The show, like the Hellman-McCarthy catfight itself, is really a form of shucking. Deftly directed by Jack O'Brien, with a few bold scenic touches by the set designer Michael Levine and some clever video projections by Jan Hartley, "Imaginary Friends" glitters with professionalism but to almost no point. At the end, a psychoanalyst, Muriel Gardiner (the excellent Anne Pitoniak), whose life story Hellman seems to have borrowed for "Julia," adds some ideas to an evening of biographical badinage. McCarthy, who was not told about her parents' deaths, from influenza, when she was six, is obsessed with truth; Hellman, on the other hand, who witnessed her father's sexual peccadilloes and was persuaded by the maid to lie about them, spent her life "telling lies and expecting to be applauded for it." Pitoniak gets a hand at her exit as much for the substance she brings to the evening as for the humane character she inhabits. In the final faceoff, McCarthy says to Hellman, "I believe in the truth." Hellman answers, "I believe in the story." In "Imaginary Friends," sad to say, we get neither.

Revenge has its most creative outlet in comedy, where it kills the spirit of gravity. Elaine May's laugh-out-loud sortie into Public Access pornography, "Adult Entertainment" (at the Variety Arts, directed by Stanley Donen), features Heidi-the-Ho and her porn-star pals—who long to have words, not just genitalia, in their mouths. May loves her collection of lost meatheads, and her fine cast, including Danny Aiello, Jeannie Berlin, Eric Elice, and Linda Halaska, makes you care for them even as May pokes good fun at their stupidity. When Jimbo, the star of "Jumbo," complains, "My johnson gave me my start . . . and the only lines I ever got to say were like 'Take it all,'" May contrives—with the help of a Yale-educated cameraman—to have him and the others go from anal to art. Some of this is wonderfully dopey—for instance, May's lewd lyrics in "Eatin' Box Lunch with You" and "Orangutan Bang," which goes, in part, "I wanna forneo / With big guys from Borneo." "Life is a jest / And all things show it," the cameraman says at the play's coda. May is one joker who's still wild. ♦

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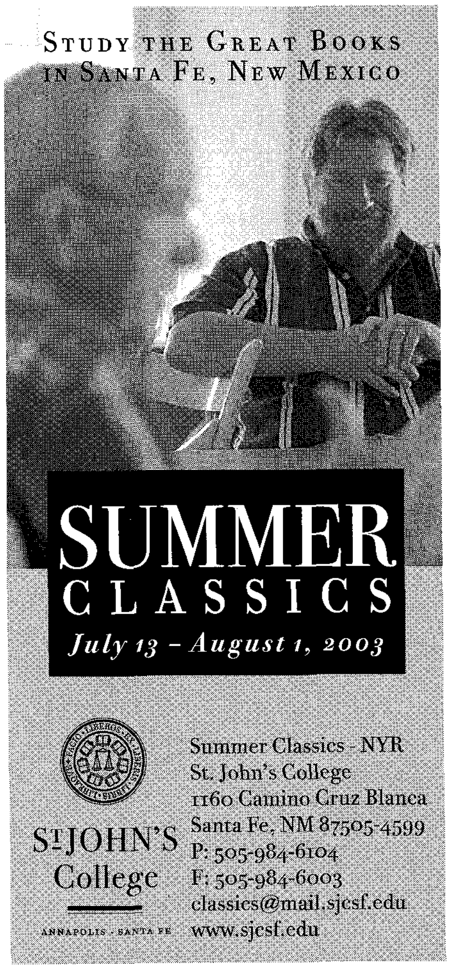

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

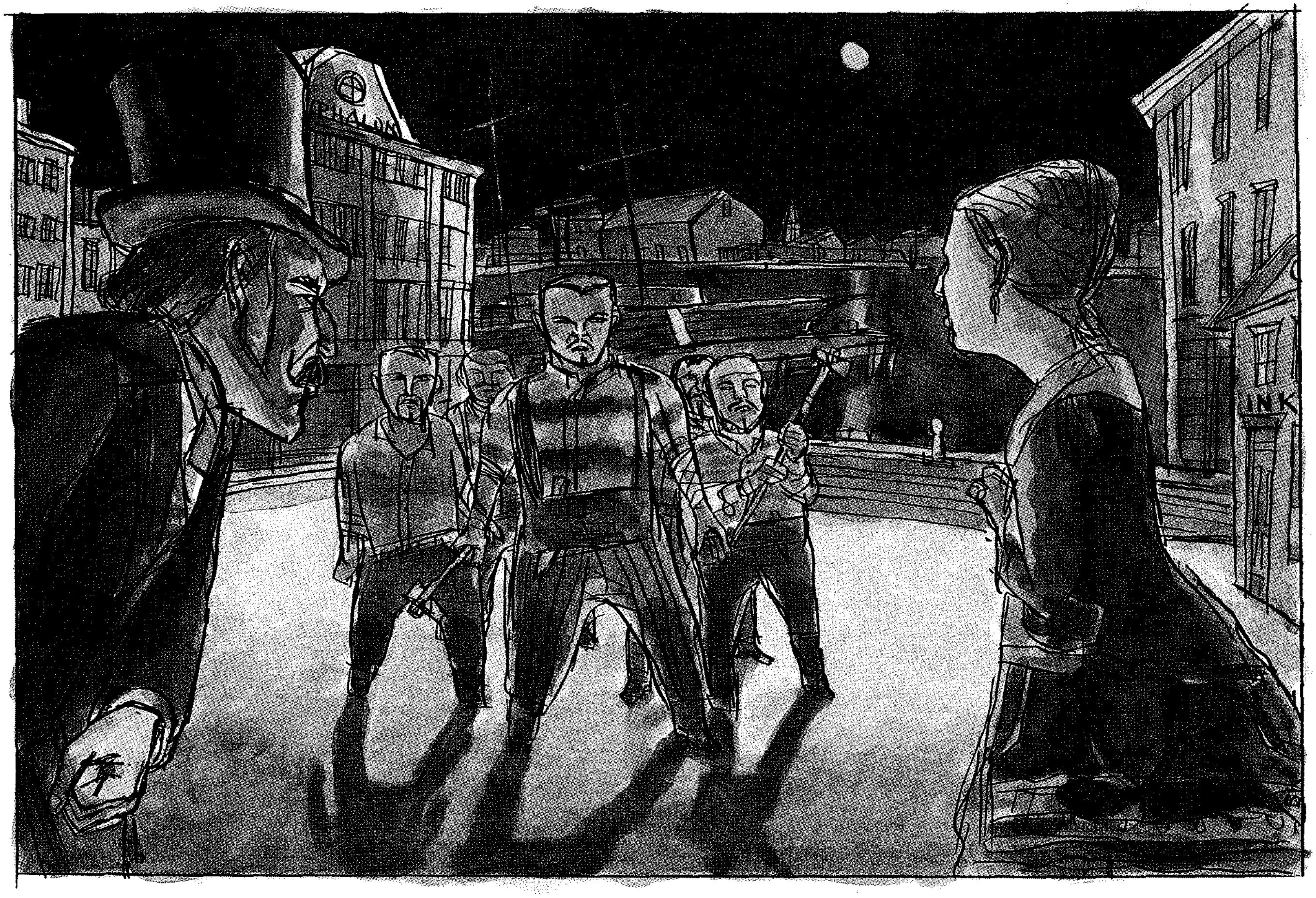
FOR THE LOVE OF FIGHTING

"Gangs of New York," "Catch Me If You Can," "The Hours."

BY DAVID DENBY

What's going on with the English? For years, all you had to do was turn on a light bulb and they would show up to act. But recently several talented young men have threatened to abandon their calling in pursuit of higher virtue. Just when Linus Roache's career should have taken off, the accomplished star of "Priest" spent a couple of years meditating in the East, and the great Daniel Day-Lewis has devoted some of his time since 1997 to making shoes—in Florence, no less. The world may have gained an excellent cobbler, but no one, I think, who sees Day-Lewis's work in Martin Scorsese's "Gangs of New York" could ever wish him to take up hammer and awl again. The movie is strange and muddled—a disorganized epic—but Day-Lewis, disporting himself with royal assurance, does what he can to hold it together. He plays the ferocious gang leader William Cutting—Bill the Butcher, the head of a nativist Yankee (i.e., Protestant) group of thugs in mid-nineteenth-century New York. Irish Catholics are pouring into the city, and Bill wants to retain control of the Five Points area and keep the Irish down. Tall and lean, with a glass eye and a huge handlebar mustache (you could hang Christmas ornaments from it), Day-Lewis swaggers about the neighborhood in a stovepipe headpiece and speaks in a pancake-flat American accent. Usually when Englishmen try to imitate Americans, they sound like bored airline pilots flying back and forth between Des Moines and Topeka. But Day-Lewis has created a startling new music, and the screenwriting team, of Jay Cocks, Steven Zaillian, and Kenneth Lonergan, has written well for him. Like Iago or Richard III, Bill has a way of standing outside himself and commenting wittily on his own perfidious acts. Wielding knife and cleaver, this vengeful brawler makes bloody messes that he knows are gratifying to others. He's a consciously theatrical monster, and Day-Lewis—an actor playing an actor—returns to performing with a glee that he's never shown before.

Scorsese has been dreaming about this material since 1970, when he first read the 1928 "Gangs of New York," Herbert Asbury's raffishly entertaining collection of tall tales about Manhattan lowlife. What's on the screen after the long struggle to complete the project certainly isn't boring—some of the movie is very imposing—but it's grisly and heavy-spirited. Somewhere along the way, Scorsese's conception turned vague and then got pickled in excessive production values. He and his screenwriters never successfully joined the intimate personal drama and the vast historical panoply of crowds. "Gangs" begins in 1846, with a fight in the snowy streets between Bill's nativists and a group of recent Irish immigrants led by the noble Priest Vallon (Liam Neeson). Without protection of any sort, the men go at it with knives, hatchets, razors, spikes, and clubs, and Bill kills Vallon as Vallon's little boy watches from the sidelines. Sent to prison by Bill, the boy emerges in 1862 as a beefy young man (Leonardo DiCaprio), mysteriously possessed of full knowledge of women and the ways of the underworld. He calls himself Amsterdam and insinuates himself into Bill's gang. Will Amsterdam kill the tyrant who slew his father? Or will he be seduced by Bill's power and lose his desire for vengeance? Bill, not knowing who the young man is, becomes fond of him; he even thinks of him as a son and looks the other way when Amsterdam sleeps with his old girlfriend Jenny (Cameron Diaz), a feisty prostitute and pickpocket. There's something movieish and too familiar about this plot, with its rivalry between good and bad fathers, its suggested Oedipal tensions. Yet it might have worked if Day-Lewis had anyone to act with. He doesn't. DiCaprio,



Mean streets: endless warfare between the Irish and the nativists in Martin Scorsese's "Gangs of New York."

BEN KATCHOR

muscled up and grim-faced, his finely cut features fuzzed with a wispy beard, his acquired breasts now larger than those of his female co-star, settles into a stolid attempt at macho, and gives a solemn, uncommunicative performance that leaves one longing for James Cagney's bantam-cock walk. After a few tigerish embraces, DiCaprio and Diaz offer each other very little. The actors playing other members of Bill's gang hardly register on us.

In "The Age of Innocence" (1993), Scorsese, a modernist director operating in realist mode, adapted the conventions of large-scale costume drama and made something disciplined and vital out of Edith Wharton's upper-class New York milieu. The silk and crinoline rustled exquisitely. But, working in the street, Scorsese is caught between a film epic's demand for poetry and beauty and his own taste for rawness and discord. One feels the strain in almost every scene. Some of the exteriors are overly busy in the tiresome way of historical pictures: the lewd strumpets and dirty-faced urchins appear to be doing something nasty in every corner of the set. The fights turn into wild and vicious scrambles (not always coherently shot and edited). But the picture, for all its movement, is rarely exhilarating: the interiors are smoky and grottolike, and too many scenes are set in what appears to be a cave. I know that nineteenth-century interiors were often dark and uncomfortable, but we spoiled moderns don't necessarily benefit from feeling as oppressed as our ancestors were. Pursuing a misbegotten authenticity, the filmmakers enclose us in claustrophobic unhappiness. Scorsese's costume designer, Sandy Powell, provides a fashion show in stovepipe hats, and the hand-painted signs and scraggly three-story buildings look as forlorn as they often do in photographs of old American cities. What the design doesn't much suggest, however, is New York itself. We wait in vain for a thrilling premonition of the future, a hint of the colossus lurking in the city's mingy early history. (The filmmakers must have sensed that the thrill was missing, because they tried to produce it in a tiny afterword.) "Gangs" was shot in Rome's Cinecittà, where Fellini mounted his "Satyricon," and produced by Alberto Grimaldi, who was also Fellini's producer, and at times it has the depressive feverishness of Fellini's film—the jeering spectators mounted in multitiered sets, the furtive life of the crime-ridden metropolis, with its hapless poverty, its barbaric entertainments, its obscure and unredeemed suffering.

For all its labored realism, "Gangs" never comes alive as a dramatic conception. It's Bill and his flashing knives that Scorsese cares about most. In the movie's opening shot, a man is seen shaving, without soap, and after that it's naked steel all the way—steel cutting, gutting, mutilating self and others, and always blood, blood, blood. In a Scorsese classic like "Goodfellas," the grisliness of the violence was funny because it was presented so offhandedly. But in "Gangs" Scorsese stages a knife-throwing sequence before a huge crowd, a scene of cornball menace that becomes an embarrassing low point for a great director. For the first time, Scorsese has theatricalized and formalized violence, and some of us may resist being drawn into his fetishistic obsessions. The endless gang war is presented as a love of fighting for its own sake, acted out strictly along ethnic lines. I'm no Marxist, but I can't believe that such a war would be fought without a material cause. Was it a battle for control of the East Side docks? The whiskey trade? Gambling? Distribution of matchsticks and dustpans? Grounded in nothing but blood, the gang war seems a mere projection of an audience-pleasing device onto the past. Scorsese and his writers drop Boss Tweed (Jim Broadbent) and Tammany Hall corruption into the action, but historical allusiveness is not the same thing as historical accuracy. In all, "Gangs" is an example of the fallacy of research: they got the hats and knives right, but the main lines of the story don't make much sense.

If lower-class white groups were fighting each other, wasn't it likely that they wanted to avoid the bottom rung of the social ladder, where blacks, with no other choice, had to live? Blacks are the repressed presence in this movie fantasy, and the omission makes nonsense of the sequences devoted to the horrific Draft Riots of 1863. There were populist elements in that rebellion (for three hundred dollars, a young man could buy his way out of conscription), and the filmmakers harp on them. Fair enough. But they also present the riot as an outgrowth of the Irish fight against the nativists. The tone of what we see is, at first, celebratory—it's a virtuous revolt, the Bolsheviks coming down the street—and then, as Union soldiers fire on the rioters, tragic. The actual rioters, however, burned down a Negro orphanage and strung up black men on lampposts and set them on fire (the orphanage doesn't show up in the movie, the lynchings only in passing). It was blacks who suffered most in this tragedy. The filmmakers, hoping to memorialize the immigrant Irish as the soul of a new nation, went down the wrong path, then pulled back, only to end in confusion, halfway excusing an awful event. The movie closes on a proudly elegiac note: modern America, it seems, was born in the gang wars; a significant and even noble period in New York life was unjustly forgotten. But at that point a hard-nosed Rudy Giuliani voice inside me piped up: "If the gang violence hadn't subsided, the city might never have developed. What is there to memorialize?"

The best thing in the movie is not an epic moment but a long monologue delivered by Daniel Day-Lewis. Wounded and sleepless, his Bill Cutting wraps an American flag around himself and talks to DiCaprio's Amsterdam about the importance of looking one's opponent in the eye and the necessity of plucking out one's own eye when that organ has failed in its duty. Bill is a madman explicating his fiercely literal sense of honor, and Day-Lewis, wriggling his finger to suggest eye-gouging, gives us the chills as only a great actor can. This man was born to act, and I say if the shoe fits, wear it.

Leonardo DiCaprio appears in another new movie, Steven Spielberg's charming "Catch Me If You Can," and this time DiCaprio, playing a teen-age con man, a slender and seductive boy, looks very much like a movie star—he's on top of his game, and he dominates every scene. The movie is based on the autobiography of the real-life Frank W. Abagnale, who may have been the most resourceful adolescent in the history of American youth. When Frank's adored dad (Christopher Walken), a New Rochelle store owner and minor scam artist, runs afoul of the I.R.S. in the sixties, and then loses the love of Frank's French mother (Nathalie Baye), Frank, acting out his rage and chagrin, turns himself into an airline pilot. And then into a doctor. And then a lawyer, kiting checks, here and in France, in totals running into the millions. The impostures are all for Dad, to restore the old guy's lost honor, and Christopher Walken, who has rarely been the recipient of love in the movies, has his most sympathetic role in a career largely devoted to sinister loonies. Will Frank get away with it? At the F.B.I., Agent Hanratty (Tom Hanks) pursues the arrogant child with Javert-like relentlessness. The movie becomes an elaborate chase, in which the heavy-breathing Hanratty,

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—Francis Steegmuller, *The New York Times*

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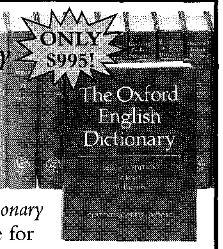

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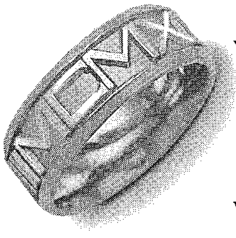

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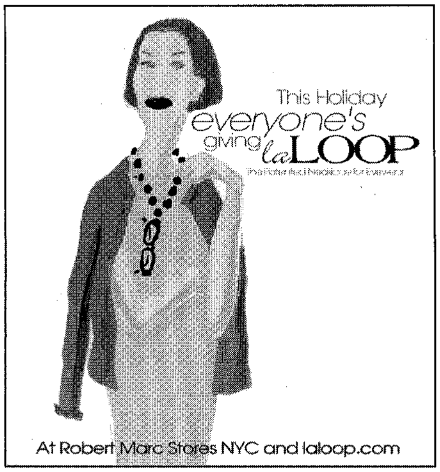
imprisoned in F.B.I. drag—black suit, hat, owlish glasses—races after a chameleon who can wear any uniform, assume any identity he wants. Frank is irresistible, and Hanratty, though sticking to his job, feels the love of a father for a scapegrace son. Amused and challenged by Frank, Hanratty becomes protective of him. After the clenched seriousness of "A.I." and "Minority Report," Spielberg must have sensed that he owed us some fun, and the movie has a sleek and carefree look—the lightness of a sixties comedy, made with the extraordinary speed and panache of our most fluent director. This is a true holiday film, a gift from some genuine pros who know how to entertain without sweat.

"The Hours," adapted from Michael Cunningham's award-winning 1998 novel, cuts back and forth among three locations and four time periods: Los Angeles in 1951, where a housewife (Julianne Moore) under the strain of depression is planning suicide; New York in the present, where a literary editor (Meryl Streep) hopes to give a party for a poet friend (Ed Harris) who is dying of AIDS; and England, where Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) composes one of her masterpieces, "Mrs. Dalloway," in 1923, and then, eighteen years later, loads her pockets with stones and walks into a river. The movie has to overcome an overall morbidity and Philip Glass's music, as well as its fractured time sequence, and, amazingly, it does—it sails through. "The Hours," written by David Hare and directed by Stephen Daldry, is a lovely, serious work that should find a larger audience than this kind of literary movie usually does. That Julianne Moore can be immensely touching is no surprise; that Meryl Streep, again playing a contemporary New Yorker, has achieved a new, flowing emotional immediacy at the age of fifty-three will shock no one. The revelation is Nicole Kidman as Woolf: tall, pale, severely beautiful, eyes cast down, with an awkwardly darting energy and a sudden harsh anger, as of an enormous bird disturbed in its rest. The twin themes of "The Hours" are the variety of human bonds, especially the bond of love, and the gift that the dying make to the living. The miracle is that such sombre notions fit together as surely and lightly as the dancers in a Balanchine ballet. ◆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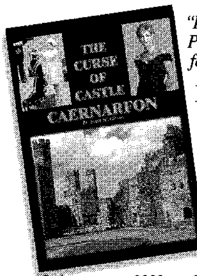

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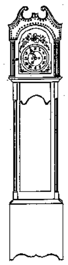

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THE BACK PAGE BY PAUL SLANSKY

2002: THE QUIZ

1. How did Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien respond when his spokeswoman called George W. Bush a "moron"?

(a) He pulled out a photograph of Bush reading an upside-down book and said, "She may have a point."

(b) He said, "She calls me Cretin. Do you see me getting all upset?"

(c) He accepted her resignation and said that Bush is "not a moron at all."

(d) He held up a photograph of Bush looking through binoculars with the lens caps still on and said, "You tell me, does he look like a moron?"

2. True or false: An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* referred to people who have so little money that they pay no income tax as "lucky duckies."

3. Who is Nedra Ruiz?

(a) The obese teen-ager who filed a lawsuit against McDonald's, blaming the company for causing her weight to rise to almost three hundred pounds.

(b) The defense lawyer in the California dog-mauling trial who crawled on the floor during her opening statement.

(c) The Saks security officer who testified that Winona Ryder said her director had told her to shoplift.

(d) The then seventeen-year-old whom the disgraced Chicago *Tribune* columnist Bob Greene had sex with fourteen years ago.

4. Whom did Michael Jackson call "very, very, very devilish"?

(a) The infant he dangled over a balcony in Berlin.

(b) The plastic surgeons who destroyed his face.

(c) The chairman of his record label, who he claimed failed to promote his latest album sufficiently.

(d) Catholic priests who molest children.

5. What did Michael Ovitz, Martha Stewart, and Madonna have in common this year?

(a) They each went public with their fondness for Eminem.

(b) They each provided the entertainment community with a blast of Schadenfreude.

(c) They each attended the David Gest–Liza Minnelli wedding.

(d) They each admitted subscribing to PursuitAlert, a paging service that notifies them when there's a televised police chase.

6. Which of these former C.E.O.s or C.F.O.s did not make news this year by being photographed in handcuffs?

(a) G.E.'s Jack Welch.

(b) Adelphia's John Rigas.

(c) WorldCom's Scott Sullivan.

(d) ImClone's Samuel D. Waksal.

(e) Tyco International's L. Dennis Kozlowski.

Who said what?

7. "In the corporate world, sometimes things aren't exactly black and white when it comes to accounting procedures."

8. "[Osama bin Laden is] either alive and well or alive and not too well or not alive."

9. "How many Palestinians were on those airplanes on September 9th? None."

10. "First of all, let's get one thing straight: crack is cheap. I make too much money to ever smoke crack. Let's get that straight. O.K.?"

(a) George W. Bush.

(b) Dan Quayle.

(c) Whitney Houston.

(d) Donald Rumsfeld.

11. Who is Mike Darnell?

(a) One of the two America West pilots who were fired for preparing to fly a plane while drunk.

(b) The Texas man who was sentenced to life in prison for shooting and killing a longtime friend he had accused of drinking his last beer.

(c) The former Army researcher who became a suspect in the anthrax mailings.

(d) The Fox executive who thought up "Celebrity Boxing."

12. Who explained that the Bush Administration waited until September to push publicly for war with Iraq because, "from a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August"?

(a) Attorney General John Ashcroft.

(b) Chief of staff Andrew Card.

(c) Press secretary Ari Fleischer.

(d) National-security adviser Condoleezza Rice.

13. True or false: In a lawsuit filed in Los Angeles seeking to overturn the $33.5-million civil-court judgment against him for the murders of his wife, Nicole, and her friend Ronald Goldman, O. J. Simpson complained that the guilty verdict has caused him to "suffer relentless ridicule."

14. Which headline did not appear in a major daily newspaper?

(a) "BUSH PREPARES MAJOR EASING OF INDUSTRY POLLUTION RULES"

(b) "BUSH PLAN GIVES MORE DISCRETION TO FOREST MANAGERS ON LOGGING"

(c) "EPA PROPOSES TO EASE RULES ON CLEAN AIR"

(d) "REPUBLICANS MOUNT CAMPAIGN TO RENAME ALZHEIMER'S 'REAGAN'S DISEASE' "

Answers:
(1) c, (2) True, (3) b, (4) c, (5) b, (6) a—Welch made news because of his grotesquely generous retirement package, (7) a, (8) d, (9) b, (10) c, (11) d, (12) b, (13) True, (14) d—it appeared in *The Onion*.

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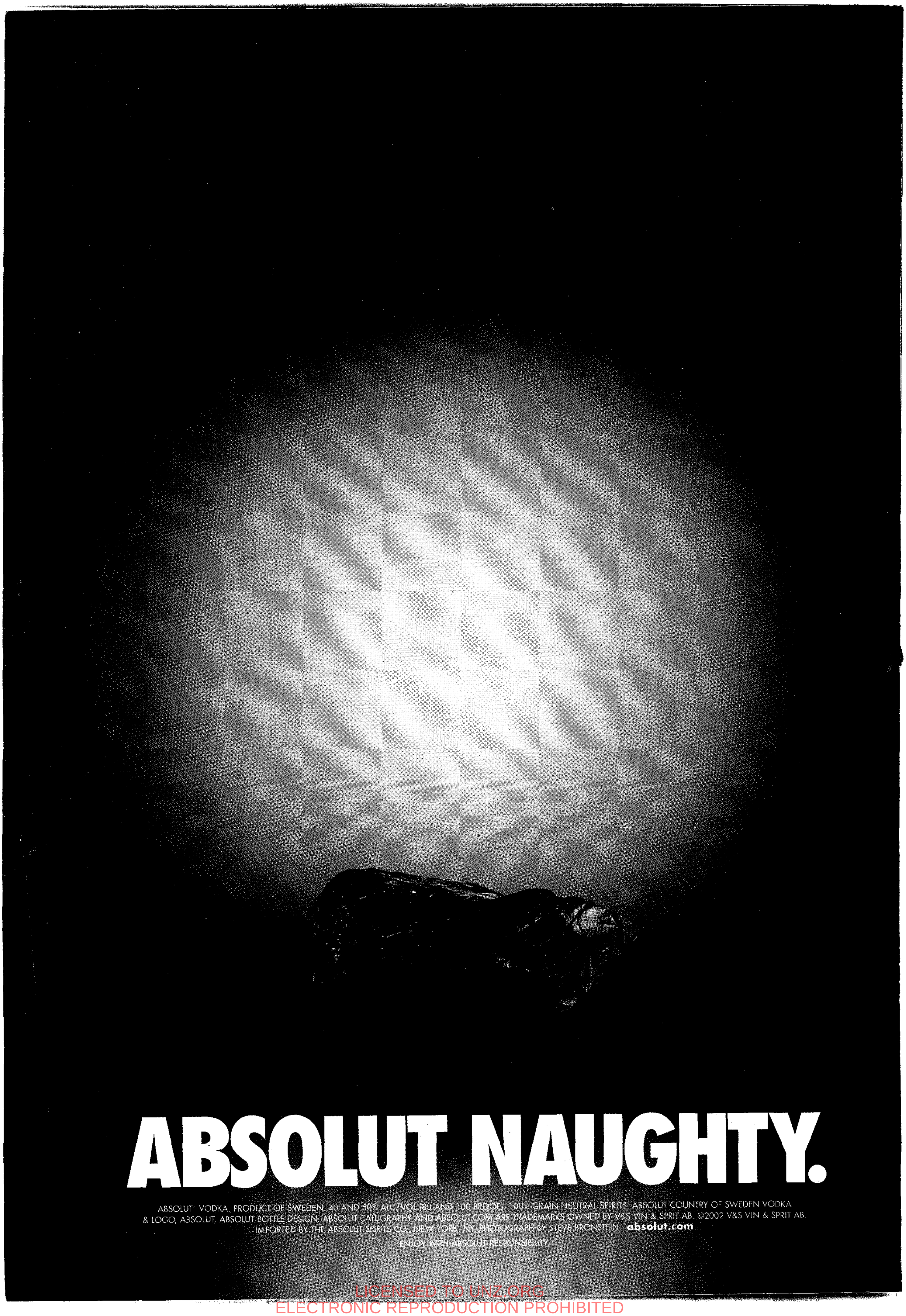

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